

ROSES OF THE WINDS

**FRIENDS
OF ACPL**



LUSTIG SONIA

JU.S

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**FRIENDS
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ROSES OF THE WINDS



*Tamara had taken the whole household
by storm.*

THE WINDMILL BOOKS

ROSES OF THE WINDS

BY
SONIA LUSTIG

ILLUSTRATED BY
BORIS ARTZYBASHEFF



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U. S. 745876

I DEDICATE THIS BOOK TO THOSE
WHO LOVE THEIR NATIVE LAND
AND THROUGH THAT LOVE LEARN
TO RESPECT AND CHERISH THE
GOOD AND BEAUTY IN THE
COUNTRIES NOT THEIR OWN

FOREWORD

[There is a legend in Russia that right in the center of the earth where the four winds from all the parts of the world meet there is a place of absolute stillness. In that place grows a rose bush called the "Rosebush of the Winds." The winds come from North and South and East and West and whisper to the roses the tales of what is going on all over the world. The roses listen and grow wise and understanding.

The Vassenbach von Vassenbach children were like those Roses of the Winds, the grandfather on one side being a German from the Baltic Provinces, the grandmother from Great Russia, the grandfather on the other side being of Polish origin and the grandmother of Swedish. They were thus connected with the best families of all Russia and brought up along broad lines of religious and political tolerance and a thorough knowledge of customs and ways of their vast country.

That was why their mother, Countess Vassenbach von Vassenbach, called her children Roses of the Winds.

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LIST OF IMPORTANT CHARACTERS

Because Russians always have many confusing diminutive and pet names for each other, we give you a list of those you will find in this book. The full name is used on formal occasions or as a mark of respect.

Count Nikolai Ivanovitch Vassenbach von Vassenbach; Kolia; Kolinka; Nicholas; Nikolashenka.

Countess Natalia Lvowna; Natalie; Natasha; Natashenka; Natalia Vasilievna Vassenbach von Vassenbach; Mother; Mama, Mamotchka; Matushka.

Olga; Olia; Olenka; Oletchka; Olusha; Olga Nicholaevna (daughter of Nicholas).

Michel; Misha; Mishenka Nicholaevitch (son of Nicholas).

Niania; Nianushka; Niania Anfisa.

Nusha; Nushenka; Anna Nicholaevna (daughter of Nicholas).

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Leva; Levushka; Lev Nicholaevitch (son of Nicholas).

Captain Medvedeff.

Lubov Nikolaevna Medvedeva; Lubasha; Lubashenka.

Father Boris.

Dushan.

Prince Smirensky; George

Princess Lena Smirensky.



CHAPTER I

THE TSAR'S REVIEW

THE third Sunday in March, 1865, was appointed as a day for reviewing all troops in and around St. Petersburg. A foreign royal prince was to visit Russia, and the Emperor wanted to impress him with the number, the magnificent appearance, and the splendid training of his favorite, hand-picked guards. Special stringent orders were sent out

to the commanding officers. For weeks beforehand, troops marched and rehearsed from early morning until late at night. Uniforms, horses, and ammunition were inspected, repaired or replaced, and polished over and over again. *Kartzers* were overflowing with officers, and men were arrested and severely punished for the least oversight or mistake. Military bands, songsters, and dancers were practising in every available corner. For days before that Sunday, all, from the highest officers to the lowest third assistant and down to the second "cookie," who had nothing whatever to do with the parade itself, were worn out, tired, and irritable, and barely able to stand on their feet.

On the day of the parade, reveilles were sounded long before sunrise though the review was not to take place until two in the afternoon. Orders were issued to give out extra "bracers" to all hands, and for hours afterward the smell of vodka hung heavily around the mess yards. At quarter past one, as if by magic, all regiments were in their places, slicked, excited, and happy.

By two o'clock 30,000 men were standing at attention, bodies erect, eyes turned to the right, awaiting the signal. By two-fifteen the Im-

perial cortège arrived, and 30,000 lusty voices shouted greetings to their beloved father-Emperor: "Hurrah! Hurray! Hurray! we wish good health to Your Imperial Majesty!"

The Commander in Chief waved his white gloved hand, and the exercises began. Everything went off beautifully; not a mistake was made, not a man or a horse moved out of turn; only once did one long straight line of soldiers and horses slightly curve for a few seconds where Count Vassenbach, colonel of the Kirasiers, was in command. One of the horses slipped in the mud, and the rider fell off just as the signal "Forward—march on the gallop—quick" was given. The man picked himself up at once, and Count Vassenbach gave the expected signal. But this half-minute delay was enough to curve for a moment the last lines of the marching regiments.

The Emperor did not notice it, nor for that matter, did any one else except General Fanfaroff, Count Vassenbach's superior officer and his sworn enemy.

The parade over, the Emperor, much pleased with the review, congratulated the field marshal on the splendid condition of the troops and on their good work. The royal guest added his

praises and the Imperial cortège adjourned to the palace.

The field marshal passed on the praises to the commanders of the divisions and gave the signal to dismiss the troops.

One by one, the regiments were dismissed and left the field.

General Fanfaroff's division was the only one left.

Instead of calling all the colonels of his divisions and repeating to them the Emperor's gracious words, he galloped furiously to Count Vassenbach's regiment and, breaking all the rules of military etiquette, shouted: "Colonel Vassenbach, what did you mean by delaying the signal for several minutes, thus outrageously curving the line of your regiment?"

"A man fell off, Your Excellency."

"What of it! It should not have detained you. The absence of one man would not have been so noticeable as the delay in moving forward."

"The man would have been trampled to death, Your Excellency."

"What of it? What does one life matter when it comes to disgracing His Majesty before his royal guest?"

"But surely, Your Excellency, His Majesty would not have wished to have a life sacrificed to the straightness of the line. It was but half a minute."

"How dare you argue! Be silent when you are talking to me!"

A smile flickered on the face of one of the young officers.

Count Vassenbach himself looked stern and white. He was using all his will power in the effort to curb his temper.

"But surely——" he began.

"Keep silent, you liberal, you—you—you—radical. You are a disgrace to your uniform, sir! Do not argue with me, I tell you. You are a disgrace, you are a rebel. Your whole regiment is a disgrace to our great army and should be beaten with knouts until they learn to march like soldiers and not like suckling pigs—you—you—you liberal. I will show you who I am! I—I——"

The General worked himself into such a fury that he lost both his voice and his breath.

Turning around, he galloped back, angrily gave some instructions to one of his adjutants, and galloped off the field.

The adjutant approached Count Vassenbach,

saluted him, and reported in a shaky voice: "General Fanfaroff greets Colonel Vassenbach and expresses to him his displeasure. The regiment is to be put on bread and water for forty-eight hours with double guard duty. Colonel Vassenbach is to surrender his sword and to consider himself under arrest in his house until further orders." And then he added: "Sorry, Count! Tough luck. But it will blow over soon. We know you were in the right."

CHAPTER II

A GRAVE DECISION



HE minute Countess Natalie saw her husband, she knew that something had gone wrong. He kissed her very perfunctorily, pushed aside the children, and locked himself in his den

from whence soon came muffled sounds of angry exclamations and heavy blows.

"Someone has crossed our *Barin*," whispered the frightened servants. "Better keep out of his way. Hear him fighting the punch-bags."

Next day came the order, formidable looking with many red and gold official seals. The order read that because of insubordination and lack of zeal in training his regiment, Colonel

Vassenbach was to be released from his duties in St. Petersburg and sent to the Caucasus to take command of such and such a regiment. By the will of God and the grace of the Emperor he was to be given an opportunity to show his repentance and renewed zeal by active service during the next five years.

The blow was even worse than Count Vassenbach had anticipated.

It meant at least five years of exile, alone, in a wild country, among hostile natives, with no companionship except that of uncultured, hard-drinking inferior officers of a fourth-rate regiment. It also meant often fighting with openly rebellious tribes, and a constant danger of being stabbed in the back or of being captured by treacherous though seemingly friendly natives.

He looked at his wife. As in every crisis of their lives, she appeared perfectly calm and untroubled. Only her deathly pallor and the smouldering fire in her big gray, now almost black, eyes gave some indication of the storm raging within her.

"When shall you have to start?" she asked quietly.

"By the middle of the next month, at the latest."

"That will give you scarcely time to wind up the regiment's affairs and your own personal ones. I shall have to take care of all the domestic matters. It means, then, that we shall have to stay behind and follow you in a month or two."

"What do you mean? You do not for a moment suppose that I would let you go with me? And as for following later on—you, a woman—alone!"

"Kolinka," interrupted the Countess, "you might just as well make up your mind that I am going. Please do not let us argue about it. We have so precious little time as it is."

Their conversation was interrupted by the arrival of Prince Smirensky, brother of Countess Vassenbach. He had just learned about the "affront" given to his brother-in-law and had hastened to his house to cheer the family up, if possible, and to make arrangements about his sister and the children. They were to go to her mother's of course. Her decision, not only to follow her husband, but even to take the children along, both touched and angered him!

"Why, Natashenka," he kept saying, "it is lovely of you to show such devotion, but it is absolutely out of the question. Neither Kolia, nor Mother, nor I would allow it. Besides, it is not at all necessary. Kolia will be back in a year, perhaps sooner. If I had been in town on the day of the parade, it would never have happened. Fanfaroff knows my influence at court, and he never would have dared even to propose such a penalty. As it is now, he is cursing himself for having given way to his devilish temper. At my suggestion, he was severely reprimanded for his conduct—unbecoming to a gentleman and a full general. There is nothing left for him to do but to send in his resignation. You know how humane the Tsar is. It displeased him very much that Fanfaroff could presume to suggest that he would value so lightly a human life, even that of a private."

"Then why this punishment for Nicholas?"

"The papers about him were already signed, and we could not ask for reconsideration without being accused of favoritism. The feeling against the Baltic aristocracy is very strong just now, and his German name stands in his way. But I solemnly promise you, Sister, that in less than a year your husband will return to you."

"And can you promise that, in the meantime, no harm will come to him from the hand of some mountain bandit?"

"No. But would your presence save him from harm? Would it not, on the contrary, double or treble his worries and anxieties?"

"Georgic, please, please, do not try to dissuade me. I know I am doing right, and God will take care of us and keep us from all harm."

"But, Natashenka, think of the children, think of yourself."

"I must go. I could not let Kolia go alone, and could not leave the children behind. I wish you would not make it so hard for me by raising so many objections. The wife's place is at her husband's side, and young children should stay with their parents. It is God's will, and He will take care of us."

Countess Vassenbach seldom talked about religion, but her faith in God and His help was strong. Strong also was her love for her husband and her conviction that she and her children should follow him into exile and share all his hardships.

Every member of the large family of relatives on both sides remonstrated with her in turn, and everyone equally without avail. She

replied to all: "It is God's will that we should go, and we are going. I wish you would not make it so hard for me. You could help so much, instead, if you only would."

At last both her husband and her brother relented and gave their consent. It was decided that she should follow her husband in two months' time and travel "as light as possible."

Postal communications all over Russia at the time were slow and uncertain, but in the region of the Caucasus they were almost nonexistent. So all the detail of the time and place of meeting had to be arranged before the departure of Count Vassenbach.

Prince Smirensky introduced to them a young officer who had just returned from a three years' stay in the same region to which they were being sent. He told them a good deal about Tiflis and the surrounding country, and was very discouraging about any cultured woman or children going to live there. He also looked very doubtful every time the journey itself was mentioned. To the Countess and her mother, he told just enough to make them realize the gravity of the situation and how necessary it was to take all precautions. But with Count Vassenbach he was much more outspoken, pointing out how

every step into the country was fraught with dangers and entreating him to forbid his wife this act of sheer madness, of almost criminal folly, of courting death or that which would be worse than death. All to no purpose. Countess Natalie was adamant and finally won her point.

One of the family discovered a man who for the last four years had been in the government's employ as a courier, a bearer of dispatches. He spent practically all his time on the road between Russia and the Caucasus, and knew every stone on the way, every step, every place where danger was apt to lurk.

He was engaged on the spot to pilot the family to Tiflis, where a handsome reward would be awaiting him if they arrived in safety.

With his help, a definite plan of traveling was worked out. The final place and time of meeting with Count Vassenbach were agreed upon. He was to meet his family on the border line, bringing with him for protection a squad of strong, reliable veterans.

Everyone was pleased with Hassan except for the fact that he was a Persian, from a race of people distrusted by the Russians of that time.

Countess Vassenbach alone had no apprehen-

sion. She felt that their coming across Hassan was the first step in God's scheme of taking care of her and her family. So she placed her trust in Hassan and never wavered in it, in spite of all the hair-raising, gruesome stories so many of her well-meaning friends hastened to tell her to prove their point that probably Hassan was a liar, a thief, and a traitor, and should not be relied upon.

The question of their going and the details of the journey once settled, Countess Vassenbach did not have much time left for apprehension or hesitation.

First of all, the children had to be told. Although they lived at a time when children of the Russian nobility were supposed to be kept in the nursery until they were almost grown up and to think of nothing but toys, games, and lessons, both Count and Countess Vassenbach tried to make even the little ones feel that they were part of the family and thus should share, not only the privileges, but also the duties and responsibilities of the family life. They often talked over their plans with the children, and when possible consulted their wishes and preferences. They both felt that in a crisis like this

it was their duty to have a family conclave and to inform the children of the important step about to be taken.

So, after lunch, the family was called together.

CHAPTER III

THE FAMILY CONCLAVE



OLGA, a tall, slender little girl of eight with two heavy braids hanging 'way below her waist, and with a shy, sweet smile trembling on her lips, came in hesitatingly, leading by the

hand the three-year-old little chubby brother, Leva. Olga always looked somewhat frightened when she was told that Father wanted her in his den. Father so often expected of her things which were so very hard for her to do.

Count Vassenbach had been terribly disappointed that she was not a boy. He had wanted his first child to be a son who would be his constant companion, the upholder of the family

traditions. When a girl came instead, he tried to make her take as much as possible the boy's place. He called her Oleg, tried to teach her to write, to shoot, to skate, but she was as timid as her mother. She distrusted horses and dogs, screamed when she saw a mouse or a caterpillar, was very much afraid of the dark, and loved to play with dolls and to snuggle up to her mother or to the nurse and listen to fairy tales.

She adored her father, but fervently wished that he would not constantly talk to her about her responsibilities, her cowardliness and about her grandmother Vassenbach von Vassenbach, who once, single-handed and unarmed, killed a big wolf and saved the life of her two-year-old child who had fallen out of the sleigh when they were crossing the snow-covered prairies. Time after time he would scold Olga for her lack of courage and invariably add: "What would you have done if you had been in your great-grandmother's place? You would have run away and let the wolf eat up your baby, I suppose. And you, our eldest child, the one who should look after Mother and the rest of the children when I am away." And just as invariably Olga would hang her head and slink out of the room.

Only once did the worm turn, and to her

father's question Olga spiritedly answered: "I know one thing that I would have done. I would have held on tight to my baby and not let her fall out of the sleigh."

After Olga and the baby brother came Misha. Misha, though only five years old, was not afraid of the den or of his father. Big for his age, his brown eyes sparkling with fun, his long curls bobbing, the bells of his hobby horse tinkling, he pranced into the room waving a sword and shouting: "Make room for Bova Korolevitch! Make room for the strongest knight that ever lived." When, however, he saw his father's serious face and the tears in his mother's eyes, he dropped his horse and threw his arms around his mother's neck.

"Mamma, Mamma, why did Papa make you cry? Naughty Papa, go away."

"Hush, hush, Mishinka. Your dear papa did not make me cry, but he has something to tell you so you must be very, very quiet."

"A secret?"

"Yes, a secret."

"Here, Niania, you sit over there with the baby and keep Leva quiet."

The old nurse settled down in a big chair

with the baby, Nusha, only ten months old, in her arms, and Leva on a little stool at her feet.

"Well, children," began Father, "I have some very important news to tell you."

"Will it be my responsibility?" asked Olga.

"No, dear, of course not. Do not interrupt Papa."

"What is *interwupt*?" asked Misha.

"It means keep still, so do keep still, Misha."

"Children, we must close this beautiful home and go away from here for many, many years."

"Where is 'for many, many years?'" asked again the irrepressible Misha, but Olga slammed her hand over his mouth and the father resumed: "We are going to the Caucasus, where there are——"

But again he was not able to finish, because in rushed his favorite dog with a squawking, struggling hen in his mouth. Before he could deposit her at his master's feet, the hen freed herself and began to circle around, half running, half flying, upsetting everything that happened to be in her way, flapping her wings and squawking louder and louder.

In the commotion that followed, the departure was forgotten, and the family council, so

solemnly begun, was suddenly ended. The children were told to run away, and the nurse was sent after the culprit who had let loose the hens.

Later on, Countess Vassenbach told the children the news about their departure in her own way, making light of it and picturing it as a great adventure, a pleasant journey rather than a solemn occasion and a sad exile. She did not always approve of her husband's habit of showing the children the dark side of life, instead of the pleasant.

CHAPTER IV

ON THE WAY TO THE CAUCASUS



REPARATIONS for the journey began at once and, for the children, at least, were filled with joyous excitement. Forgotten were Olga's lessons; all rules were dropped. The two younger

children with the old nurse were sent to Grand-mother's but Olga and Misha were given the freedom of the house, an experience unknown to them before. The French governess, Misha's German nursery governess, Father, Mother—everyone was busy packing, sorting out things, giving or taking orders. No one had time to "bother" with the children so long

as they were quiet and did not get underfoot. There was no one to make them speak in French, to correct their manners, to remind them that refined children should not visit the servants' quarters.

Father was away almost all day, and Mother presided in his den, issuing orders to the servants and interviewing the stewards of the many estates, or talking over details with Hassan and making out a list of the things necessary to take with them. Countess Vassenbach told everybody that she was going to travel light, taking with her very few servants and very little baggage, but when the caravan was finally ready to start, it was not quite as small as Countess Vassenbach's words led one to think. Besides herself and the four children, there were in the party, Hassan with five men to help him carry out his orders, the head cook, two under cooks, five maids, the French and German governesses, and the old nurse Anfisa who, though almost eighty years old, would not be left behind because, as she said, she had brought up Countess Vassenbach's mother, the Countess herself, and now she would not let any stranger bring up her darling's babies. Of course, there were also two young nurses to help her, so her work would

not be very strenuous, and the journey was to be made by easy stages.

Count Vassenbach left six weeks ahead of the family, taking along with him fifteen trunks of "absolutely necessary" things without which the Countess could never get along. The rest of the family were to start with only one trunk apiece, and the servants had to pack their things into large denim bags.

On the day of the departure, the Vassenbach town house looked more like a gypsy camp ready to pull up stakes than a well-appointed manor.

The street was closed and guarded at both ends by mounted police, and along both sides stood many vehicles of all sizes and descriptions, ready to receive the passengers in the order of their importance.

Inside, the whole house was dismantled, the furniture and pictures shrouded in gray linen, windows locked and barred everywhere except in the front hall and the adjoining dining room, where, after an early hasty breakfast, the members of the household were all gathered to attend the "serving of the *moleben*," that is, the chanting by the priest of prayers for the departing ones. The priest named each one in the

party by his or her full name, sprinkling each one with holy water and giving to each a piece of blessed bread. It was the first such service Olga had ever seen, and years later she had only to close her eyes and it would all come back to her: the smell of the *ladan*, the gorgeous robes of the priest and his attendants, their long wavy hair, the way in which the priest's pointed beard bobbed up and down as he opened and shut his mouth; his thin tremulous voice chanting in a monotone: "And we pray thee, Lord, to watch over and keep in health thy slaves Countess Natalia Vassilievna Vassenbach von Vassenbach and her children Olga Nikolaevna and Michael Nicolaevitch and Leva Nicolaevitch, Anna Nicolaevna, and all the servants and members of her household who are going with her—Peter and Anna and Vera and Daria and Tekla and Archip and Ossip and Ivan"—peering over his glasses and chanting out from the long list held before him by the deacon.

Olga remembered how she did not recognize herself in "and—Thy—slave—and servant—Olga—Nikolaevna—O,—Lord." And how frightened she became when Niania pushed her forward and whispered to her to be cautious

and not to drop a crumb of the sacred *prosphira* which the priest was handing out to her.

The big traveling coach was already at the door. It was brand new, ordered for the occasion, dark and plain on the outside but comfortable and roomy on the inside, and very gay looking, because it was upholstered in pretty gray damask with wreaths of pink and yellow roses tied with blue ribbons. The Countess's mother had given it to her, saying that, as long as they were going to be confined to it for so many weeks, they might just as well have something pretty to look at.

Countess Natalia and her children were to spend a night at her mother's suburban palace, so they started at once and without delay, leaving the rest of the party in charge of Hassan.

And then pandemonium in the house broke loose—squabbles, shrieks, laughter, coarse jokes, and cries filled the air. Some could not find their bags, some were not pleased with the carriage assigned to them, some were already sorry that they had agreed to leave their home and to go so far away to an unknown country. One man got hold of some vodka and he and his pal got so drunk that they could barely stand on their feet.

The provision van had to be repacked, all bags searched and bottles of vodka confiscated; the two drunkards had to be sobered up. It took Hassan more than five hours to restore order and to start his caravan, and at that, he had to use his whip more than once.

At first the family traveled by easy stages, using their own horses and stopping overnight with some relatives or friends whose estates were not far out of their way. But after two or three weeks, the horses became almost exhausted and had to be sent back and "post" horses used instead. The traveling became much faster, but a good deal less pleasant, because it necessitated keeping to the dusty, sunny, main post road instead of cool and shady country roads. There also had to be frequent stops at the dirty, untidy station houses with all their noise and hustle and bustle where the air often was full of loud and unreserved swearing by disappointed travelers who could not get as good horses as they wanted or who had to wait too long for them. The best and quickest service was given, not in order of arrival, but according to the importance of the travelers, the size of their bribes or their aggressiveness. The

problem of night quarters also became harder and harder to solve.

As the Countess wrote to her mother :

MY BELOVED AND MUCH RESPECTED MOTHER :

Hassan says that at the next post we shall meet some couriers going north who will be willing to deliver a letter into your hands. So I am hastening to send you our greetings and to tell you that my heart is yearning for you, most beloved little Mother, but my duty is still calling me forth. And I am kissing your dear hands for the messages brought to me by General Dovokin's courier. I did not give any letter to him because he was not going back for a month. God has been good to us, as He always is to those who trust to His goodness.

The children keep well most of the time. I give them sulphur every other day and a drink only once a day, and I always make it half water and half red wine, as you advised me. Olinka is at times hard to manage; she wants a drink two or three times a day and even cries for it.

There has been a good deal of sickness among the servants. They would disobey, do stupid things and afterward pay for it. Koolitch and

Michka died yesterday because they would eat raw carrots and cucumbers and peas and then drink out of the well at the house where people were ill with cholera. They were splendid men, devoted to us, and I have cried heartily over their loss. But in a way it was a relief to me, because the other day Levushka dropped and broke a mirror—a sign of approaching death in the household which never fails, and I was afraid that it was going to be one of the children, as the mirror was too small to mean me. Praise the Lord, it must have meant people small and humble in their station of life, not in size or years.

Hassan is devoted to the children and to me, and tries to make us as comfortable as he can. But it is becoming harder and harder to do so at night. We could not possibly sleep in the post-station houses. They are too filthy for words and alive with vermin. I went into one myself and, please excuse me for mentioning such a thing to you, dear Mamma, but the table and the walls were black with the bugs crawling over everything, not in the least afraid of people. I reprimanded the station master for his untidy ways, but he said God would not have created the cockroaches if he did not mean them

to live in people's houses. And when I asked him why he could not have the floors swept and the benches washed, he said it would be no use, because people would be tracking in dirt all the time, and that the benches would get dirty again as soon as they were scrubbed.

We are now traveling day and night, because the moon is almost full. The children are very snug in their little nests in the *kibitka*, where they all, even Olia, can stretch out full length. I and Niania sleep the best we can sitting up. When our coachmen get too sleepy, we hire drivers from the stations. I often wonder when Hassan sleeps. I cannot lift the heavy curtains that shelter us from the night air and look out without seeing him, erect and wide awake, riding next to our coach or galloping along the long line of our caravan.

Every fourth day or so we find a shady place somewhere in the woods on the edge of a lake or a brook where we spend the day. The cooks make a stove and an oven and cook and bake all day preparing the food for the next lap. I am not a hearty eater, but hot dishes after living for several days on bread and cold provisions taste so good that I stuff myself like a little pigling. I am afraid you will think me very

vulgar and unladylike because I can enjoy food while separated from Kolinka and you all. Niania Anfisa says it is God's good air that makes me hungry. The children enjoy these days of rest very much. Olia and Misha run about with little nets that Uncle Serge gave them, trying to catch butterflies, but they never catch any. We all take a nap in the middle of the day, and it is so warm then that I often put Baby on the big mattress, remove her swaddling clothes, and let her kick her arms and legs until she falls asleep. Niania and the rest of them think that I am taking terrible risks exposing her to the drafts and letting her use her legs and arms before they are strong enough and before the bones are hardened. But she seems to enjoy it and has not sneezed even once. I have read that some English mothers never wrap swaddling clothes around their babies. But of course, I should never try such an innovation. I also never let a breath of night or damp or cool air touch the precious darlings. Our *ki-bitka* can be made almost airtight.

A month later, Countess Vassenbach was writing in her diary—a big volume of blue velvet with heavy hand-wrought silver clasps and

a lock—a present from her brother for whom she had promised to keep a full account of their journey and their life in the Caucasus:

“Our party has grown very small. Five of the *tcheliad* [lower servants] were claimed by Death, three had to be left behind sick, some were sent back home with the horses and extra carriages. All the governesses, one by one, got tired of the hardships and found places in the families of my friends where we stopped overnight. I did not blame them and gave them good recommendations; also to the servants who did not want to go any farther. There are only twelve of them now, including Hassan and his two men. I am afraid the coachman and the two cooks would have left us long ago, but they are soldiers being transferred from Kolia’s regiment in St. Petersburg to his new one. They all still have more than fifteen years of service before them. So they are fast bound to us.

“It is much more pleasant to travel now since we got into Little Russia. There are no forests, only the steppes, but the houses are so clean and pleasant that we often stop in them over night, or on days when the heat is too great on the road. And there are always orchards where we

can be cool as in the woods. Women do not seem to work here as hard as our women north have to do, so they all look young and plump and pretty. They wear white dresses gaily embroidered all over in blue and red and yellow. On their heads they wear wreaths made of bright-colored flowers which grow here in such an abundance, and on their necks they wear rows and rows of glass beads and streamers of ribbons. Men also are dressed much more gaily and picturesquely than our somber-looking Great Russians. At nightfall they all gather on the edge of the village and dance and sing. They are so clean and healthy looking that I let Niania take Olia and Misha to watch them. Olia has learned several songs, and she and Misha can dance several figures of the *trepack*.

"In one of the villages, I gave an old woman some drops for her toothache. It cured her at once, and next morning she brought Olia a beautiful Ukrainian dress that she was embroidering for her granddaughter. She would not let me pay her. And her little grandchild was so dear and willing to give up her dress that we gave her Olia's new French doll and many pieces of ribbons. Olia thought of it first. I

am glad that she promises to grow up good-hearted and generous to those beneath her."

And a few weeks later:

"We are nearing the place where we are to meet Kolia. The longest part of the journey is behind us, but the dangers of the last lap are looming bigger and bigger. Hassan is on the watch every moment, and we do not travel at night. My heart is beating fast and my hands are trembling when I think of the ferocious people among whom we shall soon dwell. But I put my trust in the Lord My Saviour, and He will lead us to the green pastures and clear waters. And when I think that I am to see my husband before the week is over, my heart is filled with happiness and gratitude. Misha awoke crying in the night: 'I want my papa! I want my papa to take off the stone from my stomach. It hurts me!' I am afraid the stone was inside his little stomach. I told him not to eat so many of the *vareniki* because they were not quite done, but he must have eaten ten or twelve in spite of my warning. How different a boy is from a girl, even at this tender age."

Olia is four years older and she would never think of disobeying me; but Misha defies me all the time. It takes a man to curb and govern a boy. Oh, Kolia, my beloved Kolia, we need you so much! And they wanted me to stay behind and bring up our children alone without your help!!!”

That was the last entry that Countess Vassenbach made for a long time. Events began to happen so fast that she had neither time nor heart for writing.

U. S. 745976

CHAPTER V

HASSAN'S TREACHERY



FIRST of all, though they were three days later than the date agreed upon, they did not find Count Vassenbach and his guard in the appointed place, at the station at which was one of the government strongholds of the frontier. And there was no word of explanation for this delay. Then Hassan began to act very suspiciously. He kept disappearing, and his two helpers reported to Countess Natalie that they saw him several times with a vicious-looking man who was known to them as Abdec the Sly—a man who openly bragged that for good pay,

he could carry out any crime from assassination and robbery to kidnaping of women and children. He was suspected of many crimes, and the governor of the province set a good price for capturing him, dead or alive. But though many tried, none ever succeeded in catching or killing him. It was with such a man that Hassan seemed to have secret dealings. And he evaded the Countess whenever he could and never looked her in the eyes when she tried to question him.

On the third morning, he told her to get ready for the trip, as they were to meet Count Vassenbach at the next station.

"Why, Hassan, we were to wait for him here."

"We have to go to the next station. Have to hurry, too."

The two assistant couriers warned Countess Vassenbach not to trust Hassan any further, but to wait here and try to send a message to her husband.

Countess Vassenbach did not know what to do. Hassan did act suspiciously, but she had no one else to trust. And the non-arrival of her husband was hard to explain. While she sat there, lost in troubled thoughts intermingled

with prayers, Hassan came in again and saluted.

"Ready to start, Your Excellency?"

"Hassan, where are we going?"

"To the next station, Your Excellency."

But his eyes would not meet hers. Just then, Olia and Misha ran in shouting, "Hassan, Hassan, where is our nice Hassan?"

"Oh, here is my Hassan," cried Misha, and put his fat little arms just above Hassan's knees—the highest he could reach. "Take me up, Hassan, and let me pat your beard."

But Hassan freed himself from the child, mumbling something about being busy. It occurred to Countess Vassenbach to put him to a test.

"Misha," she said, "Hassan is busy, he is taking us to Papa. Ask him how soon you will see Papa."

"How soon, Hassan?" But Hassan uneasily shifted from foot to foot and did not answer.

Countess Vassenbach's heart stood still: she was now certain that Hassan was plotting against them.

But her faith that God would not let them be harmed was unshaken. She decided to make a direct appeal to Hassan.

Taking both Misha and Olia by the hand she stood before Hassan, outwardly calm though trembling inside.

"Hassan," she said, "look at me. No, do not turn away your head. Look at me."

As if against his will, Hassan tried to look her in the eyes but could not, and looked away again.

"Hassan," continued the Countess, "here we are, absolutely in your power because of the trust we put in you. And you deserved our trust. No one could have served us better and more faithfully than you did. And now you want to betray us. Yes, you do. Do not deny it. You want to betray me, who trusted you, the children, who love you so! And what for? For more money! But what good will the money do you with the curse of God on you?"

"Hassan, have you forgotten that there is a God in heaven who is watching over us and who will let us come to no harm? If you betray us His curse will be upon you for the rest of your life." In her excitement, she raised her voice and pointed her hand accusingly at Hassan, who stood there as if spellbound.

Both children became frightened. Olia bur-

ied her head in her mother's dress, crying bitterly, but Misha ran over to Hassan and took his hand, patting it gently.

"Mamma, Mamma, you must not scold Hassan. I like my Hassan; he is nice, you must not scold him. Mamma, please do not scold him. Hassan is sorry that he was naughty. Tell Mamma you are sorry, Hassan." And he clung to Hassan, his pleading eyes on him.

There was a moment of breathless silence. Then Hassan's face began to twitch. He tried to say something but could not. He wrenched his hand from Misha's grasp and left the room without once glancing at the Countess or the children. But he returned very soon and deposited on the table, bread, meat, and some other provisions, plates, knives, and two *curdukes*—one filled with goat's milk and the other one with fresh water. He also brought in Niania and the two youngest children.

Then he said gruffly but not unkindly, "Lock and bar the door and wait here for me. I shall be gone several hours. Do not let any one in, and do not open the door until I come back. Better do not talk to any one. You understand: do not open this door to any one, *no matter*

what they say. And do not answer when they call you." He was gone and the Countess, with the help of frightened Niania, put down the iron bars on the heavy door and even dragged to it the big oak table. Then she collapsed and almost fainted. But the thought of the frightened children huddled in the corner helped her to regain her strength. Besides, somehow she felt reassured that everything would come out all right and that Hassan would not fail her. She closed her eyes for a moment, saying a silent prayer of thankfulness, and then busied herself with the children. She made them think that it was some kind of new game between them all and Hassan, and that their part was to be very good and very quiet.

She and Niania fed them, and then, while Niania put the little ones to bed, the Countess played with Olia and Misha, and told them stories. When, toward dusk, they both curled up on a big sofa in the corner and went to sleep, she took out her diary which was always in a satchel by her side.

But her writing was almost at once interrupted by a loud knock and a voice saying: "Countess, open the door, I have a message for you." Natalia Vassilievna sat up tense and

frightened, the quill suspended in her hand. But she did not answer.

The knock was repeated.

"For God's sake, Countess, open the door. I have a message from your husband. He is sick, at the next station, and he wants you to come to him. Hurry, Countess, he is dying. Don't you hear me? He is dying, and he wants you."

The Countess sprang up, hundreds of questions trembling on her lips, her hands ready to push aside the table and rush out.

But she came from a military family, and the habit of unreasoning, blind, unquestioning obedience was strong in her.

She had been ordered not to open the door to any one and not to speak to any one *no matter what was said to her*, and she was going to obey the command unreservedly now that her faith in Hassan was restored.

The knocking and the entreaty to open were repeated several times at intervals during which the Countess could hear the whisperings of several voices. Someone rattled the door-knob again and again. Then, after another whispered conversation, someone tried to force open the lock, and the creaking and groaning of the thick, strongly reënforced door told the Coun-

tess that several people were leaning on it and pushing it in the attempt to get in.

The Countess snatched up the revolver which Hassan had taken out of his belt and put on the table just before leaving. She put her finger on the trigger and stood there trembling but grimly determined to fire on the intruders. She expected every moment that they would ram the door or that someone would shoot.

But, after a little while, the pushing and the whispering behind the door ceased. There was a short commotion, the scuffling of several pairs of feet, and then complete quiet.

What did it mean?

Another fifteen minutes, and then Hassan's voice.

"Open the door, Countess; it is I, Hassan."

Countess Natalia pushed back the table, opened the door, and let Hassan in.

Dusty and dishevelled, he rushed in, fell on his knees before the Countess, and kissed the hem of her dress.

"Hassan, Hassan, what does it all mean?"

"Forgive me, gracious Countess, and do not worry. It is all right, now."

"But, Hassan——"

"Little Mother Countess, forgive me. I am

a great sinner. Prince Tchitchibadin tempted me to kidnap you and the children and to hold you for a big ransom. I agreed and sent the Count word to wait for us two stations beyond, instead of coming here as agreed. I also told him to take the post road, and I brought you by a mountain road, so we missed him. And to-day I was going to take you to the prince's *aoul* and leave you there."

"Why, Hassan, how could you?"

"Yes, I was going to, but your prayers and the children and what you said about the curse made me change heart. My mother was a Christian slave, and she often told me that if I ever betrayed a friend, the curse of God would be on me to the end of my days.

"When you were pointing your hand at me, there, behind you, I seemed to see her pointing at me too and whispering: 'The curse! The curse!'

"So I rode for hours to where the Count was and told him to come here. Then I got together a band of my loyal friends to guard you from the sudden attack of the Prince, because he knows by now that I went back on him. Forgive me, little Mother, forgive me."

"May God forgive you as freely as I do,"

said the Countess motioning to Hassan to rise. "But now tell me about my husband. Is it true that he is ill, dying?"

"Oh, so that is what this evil dog tried on you? He did not dare to use force because people around are all loyal, so he tried the ruse. I saw his men sneaking out of the house when they saw me coming."

"So it was not true? My husband is well?"

"He most certainly is," said Hassan, "and he will be here in an hour or so. I told him to hasten and come before the night fell, because of the ambushes. He was to get his men together and start at once. I left a guide with him. But he knows nothing of my betrayal. There was not time to lose in talk. We'll tell him when he gets here."

"Oh, no, no, Hassan, you must not do that. You repented and God and I forgave you, so let us forget about everything except that you were a capable and willing guide and a friend, and brought us here safely as you agreed to do. You must promise me not to mention it to my husband. Some day I will tell him about it, but not just now."

Countess Vassenbach knew her husband's quick temper and dreaded the outburst of it if

Hassan told him the truth suddenly, without choosing the right moment.

Another hour or two of suspense. Then the galloping of many horses, shouts, and the sound of tramping feet, nearer and nearer. The door burst open, and in rushed a tall, smoothly shaved *Cherkess*, his *burka* flowing, his face all but covered with the furry *papacha*. He rushed to the Countess and pressed her to his breast. The Countess screamed and struggled wildly, trying to push the man away.

"Natasha, Natashenka, bless you, don't you know your own husband?" And only then, on hearing the familiar voice, did the Countess realize that it was really her husband.

"Kolinka, how strange you look!" she giggled hysterically, holding him at arm's length and scrutinizing his face, still unfamiliar even without the *papacha* which had fallen off in the scuffle.

"Well, what is the matter with me? Have I changed so much that you did not know me?" asked the Count in a hurt voice. Not this kind of a reception did he expect from a wife he had not seen all these months.

"Kolinka, of course you have changed! I thought you were one of those wild Tchetchenzi

trying to kidnap me. This costume—and the *papacha*, and your beard and moustache gone, and your hair cropped closely to the skin—just like convicts at home.”

The Count was smiling now.

“To be sure, to be sure, I forgot how different I look. I shaved off my beard and my moustache long ago—it is much cooler so—and I did not think that you had not seen me without them.”

“But this masquerade.”

“Oh, we often wear the native costume on the night expeditions—it is safer and not so conspicuous as our uniform. I beg your pardon for startling you so, Natashenka. But where is that rascal Hassan? What did he mean by first sending me to a different place from the one agreed on, then rushing in like mad and ordering me back here? What does he——”

But the Countess tactfully and hastily changed the subject.

“Nicholas, you must see the children at once. They have grown so.”

“Yes, but do not let us startle them, too. You go and prepare them, Natasha.”

The little ones did not even wake when their father kissed them, but Olia and Misha kept

awake long enough to smile at their mother and to blink at the tall, handsome stranger, too sleepy to wonder who he was.

Early the next morning, the caravan started on the last lap. Except for the occasional shooting from an ambuscade which resulted in no bad accident, the journey was uneventful. The Countess was so tired from all the excitement, so happy in her reunion with her husband, that she paid little attention to the ever-changing, ever more and more beautiful and awe-inspiring scenery.

Through many weeks of traveling and unaccustomed hardships, Countess Vassenbach had bravely borne the strain as long as she felt the necessity of shouldering all responsibilities. But as soon as her husband once again was with her, relieving her of all care, her strength gave out, and she spent the rest of the journey as in a dream. It was good to hear her husband's voice, so firm and commanding while he gave orders, so gentle and tender when he talked to her or to one of the children; it was good, when he took his place next to her in the *kibitka*, to sit with eyes closed, her husband's hand in hers, her head resting on his shoulder, half dozing, half dreaming.

Count Vassenbach felt that it was wiser for her to keep the curtains of the carriage down during those last days of the journey, so as to hide the high cliffs on both sides of the dangerous Darial path, or the numerous crosses on each side of the road, marking the places where travelers had been felled by a treacherous Cherkess, or killed by a fall down a precipice. Misha was also at first assigned a place in the *kibitka*, but he could not keep still a minute except when asleep; he constantly insisted on climbing over everybody's lap to lift a curtain or to get a drink, or some toy or other, and his restlessness disturbed his mother so much that Count Vassenbach at last put Misha, squealing with delight, on the saddle in front of him.

Niania, Nusha, and Leva dozed most of the time, soothed by the motion of the carriage, and by the subdued light, penetrating through a small opening on top of the hood. Olia was always only too willing to sit quietly by the hour, lost in her daydreaming, in which she was always a heroine, saving infants not only from wolves, but even from bears and lions. Thus, for the last three days, the inhabitants of the main *kibitka* paid little attention to the outside world.

CHAPTER VI

THE NEW HOME



IN THE afternoon of the fifth day, they at last reached their destination — the beautiful half-European, half-Asiatic Tiflis. Count Vassenbach had been so fortunate as to get the large, completely

furnished house of his predecessor, and for the first time in many months his wife slept in comfort all night, untroubled by fears for the safety of the children.

Next morning, the sun was high on the horizon, and Count Vassenbach twice came up from his office before even the youngest of the travelers gave signs of awakening.

So the new world burst upon them suddenly and unexpectedly. The window draperies were, as yet, not hung, and the sun flooded every room of the large one-story building. The house stood on a knoll, surrounded by a large orchard and overlooking the river Kura, shallow and sleepy in summertime, but now, reinforced by recent torrents of rain, rushing madly from rock to rock, the foam and the spray of the rapids glistening in the sun and lashing furiously both sides of the shore. And, on the other side of the river, as far as the eye could reach, were visible in the valley and on the gently rising slopes of the nearest hills, vineyards, almond groves and peach orchards, still loaded with fruit and already bursting into a new bloom. The landscape was here and there dotted with tiny houses (*aouls*, they were called, said Count Vassenbach), clustered together and swarming with busy people. And still farther on rose, abrupt and forbidding, the peaks of the bare, snow-capped, inaccessible-looking giants.

Olga and her mother, both susceptible to beauty in any form, stood enchanted. But Misha was soon tired of standing still.

"Well, Papa," he said, "let us go and climb mountains, as you said we would."

"Not to-day, Son," said Count Vassenbach smiling, "not to-day. But," he added, seeing the boy's disappointed face, "I will show you instead a magic instrument that will bring the mountains to you!"

And he uncovered a big field glass, mounted so that it could revolve in any direction. He carefully explained and showed how to adjust and use the instrument, and then each one in turn was given an opportunity to look through it.

Misha had at first great difficulty in keeping one eye closed, and the other one open. But when he once mastered the art, his delight was unbounded.

"Oh, Papa, Mamma, Olia, look," he squealed, in his excitement almost falling off the chair on which he stood. "Papa, I can see houses, and lots of people. Oh, look, look, there are three women with jugs on their heads, just like in our Bible . . . and they are not holding on to them. . . . And—oh, I lost them!" he exclaimed, "and I cannot find them again. I don't see any houses now, just stones and grass, and, oh, such funny animals. Look, look, everybody, they look like dogs, but they put all their feet together, and they have horns!"

"Oh, I know," said Olia. "They must be goats. I read a lot about them in Papa's book on Switzerland."

Father patted Olia on the head.

"I am glad to hear that my little girl enjoys reading good books and remembers what she reads."

Olia flushed under this unexpected praise, and leaned her cheek on Father's hand.

"Papa, can we see real live goats some day?"

"Why, of course," said Father, "just as soon as Mother gets a little rested."

"It will not take me long, in this climate," said the Countess. "It was so thoughtful of you, Kolinka, to have my trunks and crates unpacked and everything put into place. I am afraid it has caused you a good deal of trouble. No woman could have arranged them better."

"As if I would mind, after what you have done—uprooted your family, and come with me to this wild, dangerous country! I missed you every minute, you brave little wife." And the Count's light gray, usually cold and even stern eyes filled, for a moment, with tears of gratitude.

He brushed them off impatiently and continued hurriedly,

"Besides, I should not have all the credit. Lubashenka has helped me a good deal."

"Who is Lubashenka?" exclaimed a chorus of voices.

"She is a very nice lady, and you all will love her dearly." And to his wife he explained: "She is a very remarkable woman, Natasha, and she will be a good friend to you. She is leading a very unhappy life, but you would never suspect it. She is always cheerful and friendly."

After a very few weeks of adjustment and readjustment, the family settled down to enjoy what both the Count and the Countess agreed afterward was their best and happiest year in Tiflis. The house belonged to the Count's predecessor, a rich, well-read, and much traveled man, who had not only supplied the house with all the comforts known at the time, and furnished it richly and in the best of taste, but had also acquired a large and well-chosen library, the keys to which were given to the Count with the rest of the keys to the house.

Thanks to the presence of one of the grand dukes, who thought that the mild climate of the Caucasus would help his gout, and who brought with him a large number of guests, attendants, and entertainers, the social life was

very gay, and good music and theatrical performances were not lacking.

Niania and the children were also very happy. Niania devoted all her time to Leva and Nusha who played out of doors and dug in the rich soil all day long, and grew brown and strong.

There were very few young educated women in Tiflis, and no governess could be found, so that all the care of Olia and Misha fell to the Countess.

But Lubashenka helped her a good deal. Lubov Ivanovna was a dear little woman of about fifty, short, plump, rosy-cheeked, and always smiling. Her husband, Captain Medvedeff, was a tall, powerful man of sixty, with closely shaven hair, long, hanging moustache, and a beard, reaching below his knees, silvery white at the ends, but yellow and scorched around his mouth, in which was always either a pipe or a cigar, or, more often, a cigarette. His fingertips also were yellow from constant handling of tobacco, either in rolling cigarettes or in filling the pipe.

He was very proud of his beard, and frequently combed it with a fine-toothed comb suspended on a long chain from his belt, and

tucked in between the buttons of his military coat. At night, he braided it in two braids, rolled it up, and pinned it under his chin. But in spite of his efforts, his beard always looked unkempt and untidy, full of tobacco, crumbs, and what-not.

He used to hide in it pieces of candy, or tiny toys, which he carved himself out of peach stones, and let the children search for them. He told Misha that every spring two little birds used to build a nest in his beard, and let him care for and feed their birdlings until they grew big enough to fly away. For a long time Misha and even Olia did not know whether to believe him or not, because he even showed them two or three nests which he said he removed from his beard, after the birds had left it.

At first, the children were afraid of his gruff voice and bushy eyebrows, but they soon discovered his tender heart and his love for children. He and his wife had never had any. He worshipped his wife. She always called him Captain Medvedeff, both in speaking of him and to his face, and he called her Lubashenka, and everybody else did so too. He was very proud of her dainty little feet, and used to buy for

her pair after pair of pretty shoes and slippers, and never let her step into mud. If they came to a muddy place, he either picked her up in his strong arms and carried her across, or else took off his coat and spread it for her to step on.

Neither he nor his wife had much of an education. He was a peasant's son who had served for many years in the ranks, distinguished himself in the war, and in skirmishes with the mountaineers, was given non-commissioned offices, and after many more years, reached the rank of captain—the highest he could ever reach, because of his lack of education. Even to get so far, he had to pass examinations before each promotion, and his wife, who was much brighter than he, studied with him, encouraged him, and prodded him, until the examination was passed and he received promotion. Then he “let his brains rest,” as he used to say, until the time for the next promotion.

But Lubasha never gave up her studies. She read voraciously books on all kinds of subjects, listened intelligently to “what clever people had to say,” and thought for herself. She rarely spoke, but when she did, her comments were always terse and to the point. She was very religious and detested quarreling.

She loved her Captain Medvedeff and was constantly burning large candles and ordering masses in hopes that God would deliver him from his "affliction."

It was a long time before the children found out what his affliction was, and why people pitied his wife.

Once or twice a year Captain Medvedeff would lock himself up in his bedroom. Word would be sent to the office that Captain Medvedeff had a sick spell and would not be able to report on duty for a day or two. No one was allowed to enter his room during that period, not even his wife. After a day or two, or, on very rare occasions, after three days, Captain Medvedeff would reappear looking dishevelled and unkempt, his eyes bloodshot. A big bundle under his arm, he would watch for an opportunity to sneak unobserved into the public bath-house, from which he would emerge looking trig and well groomed but still with the guilty air of a dog who knows that he deserves punishment but hopes to escape it. In the meantime, Lubashenka would air and thoroughly clean his room and bury somewhere in the garden or in the woods several empty bottles with telltale labels on them, "Vodka."

The year 1866 happened to be a very happy and quiet year for the military element. The natives made no disturbances, seemed much friendlier to the Russians, and for months not a soldier was lost, either by treachery or in an open skirmish.

This state of affairs permitted a much greater freedom to the visiting and residing Russians in their going about, and gave the Vassenbachs a splendid opportunity to see the town and the surrounding country. It also gave the Count more leisure to devote to his family, and so, every day, all of them, or some of them, took long walks or drives, both in and outside of the city. The new part of Tiflis where their house stood, and where the official buildings were located, was very commonplace and quickly seen, but the old town of the natives was picturesque, unusual, and constantly offered new delights to the sightseers. Most of the houses were dug out of the ground, with only half a story built above. They were inhabited by the poorest class, overcrowded, dark and dirty inside, and were used as sleeping places only. All the life was centered out of doors on the flat roofs and right in the narrow, crowded streets. Armenian tailors and cobblers, their legs crossed, sat on the

ground, sewing, cutting, or tapping nails into the leather. Persian merchants, with their beards, nails, and toes dyed bright scarlet, their fur hats pushed to the backs of their heads, spread out their wares on the rugs around them, and sat all day, half-dozing, smoking their long-stemmed pipes. They were not very anxious to do business, especially with foreigners, and never showed their best merchandise until the would-be purchaser rejected all trash offered to him, and sternly insisted on being shown the rare jewels, silks, or rugs.

Here, on a flat roof, would be a family cooking dinner on the hot coals; there a baker slapping thin rounds of dough on the red-hot stones in front of him. A little farther down the street, a fortune teller and astrologer would be pouring some black ink into the water, explaining to his intensely interested client the meaning of the cloudy, fantastic design thus formed by the mixture of the two liquids, or else making rapid calculation and seemingly using the dates supplied by the client while drawing his cabalistic charts.

All along the narrow streets and on the market-place were small stores, half underground, displaying their various wares. Here

and there were *dukans* (wineshops) in which wine was served from whole ox-skins, sewed at the ends to be used as a bag, all four legs sticking out in the air, and the wine drawn through the neck part. Barbers shaved and trimmed hair and dyed beards right on the street, and beggars and musicians sprawled in every available nook and corner, not minding the broiling sun and the kicks of outraged passers-by. The streets were so narrow and crooked and so often ended in blind alleys that even those who had lived in Tiflis for several years could not always find their way without a guide. Most of the guides were either Persians or Russian Jews. Besides knowing the country, they had to know a good many languages, as in the city of Tiflis, by official statistics, seventy languages and dialects were spoken constantly, and it was not an unusual thing to find a guide who had at his command from twelve to twenty-five languages.

It became a favorite game with the Vassenbach children to play "Tiflis bazaar." They would make little houses out of shawls and rugs, gather all their belongings and all the ornaments they could sneak out of the parlor, and take turns at being merchants and buyers, trying

to talk to each other in a language they invented in which words meant nothing, but guttural sounds, the inflection of the voice, and the gestures were as eloquent and typical as those of a real bazaar.

Olia, with a tablecloth or a towel pinned to the back of her dress to represent a train, or with a small shawl or rug put over her shoulders like a Circassian *burka*, would languidly approach the corner in which Misha would be seated on a rug, his legs crossed in the Oriental fashion, his head covered with Father's big fur cap, and his hands busy with toys, books, bric-à-brac, or silver. A prolonged silence on both sides. Then Olia would point to some article asking the price in which they called "Adjatic" (Asiatic) language. "Arà-Carà-Cary?" — and Misha would answer: "Hurà-Hary," or something equally meaningless but sounding typically guttural and foreign.—"Oh, no, hara-hura that is too much." "Ash-rra-harra-garra," would expostulate Misha, wildly gesticulating and swearing that he could not sell it for one kopeck less without starving to death, he and his father and mother, and wife and all the children. And then, all of a sudden, he would shove it right

into Olia's hands, saying with a sigh of resignation: "Karosh, beri." "Allah volia." ("Well, take it. It is Allah's will.")

And so the game would go on until interrupted by someone looking for a missing article in the miscellaneous heap of the children's Oriental merchandise.

CHAPTER VII

VISITING THE NATIVES



ALMOST every afternoon, long drives were taken outside of the city. Sometimes if their father was not very busy, lunch or dinner would be put up and packed in the back of the carriage, and the family would go for an all-day ride.

Varied and interesting were the sights which met the eager eyes of the children, and even the Countess was often carried away by new scenes and unusual costumes.

One day Captain Medvedeff proposed to take a trip to one of the largest vineyards, where the grapes were gathered and made into wine right

on the spot. After an hour or two of riding on the zigzag, curving roads, to the slope of the nearest hill, they came to a vineyard occupying more than two square miles. Scores of men and women in their picturesque native costumes were gathering grapes into large round baskets and carrying them on their heads to an open space in the very center of the vineyard. Here several large, deep holes lined with cement were filled with grapes. In each of these holes stood from three to five barelegged men, who danced and jumped vigorously on the grapes, making them into a most unappetizing-looking mush. The day was very hot, and as they were actually working in the sweat of their brow, a good deal of moisture, which was not grape juice, dripped into the mixture. This mush was afterward strained and the juice put into the *burduks*, every opening of the *burduk* tied with a strong string, and the *burduks* put one on top of the other into cool, spacious caves to ripen. Both the Countess and the two children were so disgusted with the way the native wine was made that never afterward would they take a drop of it, neither of native, nor of the best imported French wines, because as Olia remarked:

How did they know that the French and the Italians didn't make their wine in just the same disgusting manner!

The two-day trip to visit one of the Circasian princes in his *aoul* was much more pleasant and amusing. One of his sons was to be married, and Count Vassenbach's family was invited to the wedding. The *aoul* was built against the side of a cliff, and was very unprepossessing looking from the outside, but the inside of it was as interesting and beautiful as any of the caves in Arabian Nights stories. The walls, the ceiling, and the floor were covered with most exquisite rugs; priceless hand-forged swords and bejeweled *kinjals* were hung on the walls. All the utensils, goblets, and flasks were of hammered silver or gold, and ornamented with rich jewels, which came, as Prince Babachin explained to his guests in all seriousness, and with full belief in what he was saying, from the same cave in which was found the cradle of Jesus, on the northern slopes of Kasbeck, near the very top of the peak at which Noah's Ark was anchored.

The wedding feast, lasting from morning until late at night, was resumed again on the next day.

(Sometimes festivities lasted for a week or longer.) All this time, the bride and the bridegroom had to sit in a corner, she heavily veiled, he armed to the teeth and with a heavy fur cap on his head and a warm felt cloak on his shoulders, as a sign that he was now to become master of a new household. Neither the bride nor the bridegroom was supposed to eat anything, but the guests, even the little children, were not only invited, but urged, and almost coerced, into eating heartily and drinking heavily.

On the table in front of the bridal couple stood all the national dishes. The center of the table was occupied by a wild boar, roasted out of doors and carried into the *aoul*, the fat dripping all the way and collecting in little pools on the table and on the floor. *Shashliks* hot from the fire and still speared on long, narrow steel rods were piled on every available place on the table, and the whole dwelling, as well as the people, reeked with onion and garlic, liberally used in cooking. Both the Countess and her daughter had hard work not to faint in the heavy, close atmosphere. Misha almost mortally offended his host by leaving the table. He said that he had had enough, and ran outdoors to listen to the music. The guide who came

with the family had to use a good deal of tact and diplomacy in explaining to the offended Prince that the boy meant no disrespect, but was only badly brought up, not having had the honor of belonging to some illustrious Circassian family.

It was a great relief to them all when the guide said that the time had come for them to leave unless they wanted to stay to the end of the festivities, which might last for three or four days. As neither the Count nor the Countess was anxious to do so, they thanked their host for his hospitality, and drove over to the nearest village to see the return of the flocks to their winter quarters. According to the custom of the land, they left the host's house with a heavy load of miscellaneous gifts assigned to them as the guests of honor. As these gifts included not only fruits and wines in heavy silver flasks and dishes but also live goats, donkeys, pheasants, ducks, and chickens, the caravan had become somewhat noisy. They entered the village with braying, squawking, and cackling, thus attracting a good deal of attention.

Olia and Misha were told that every fall, with the appearance of the first snow, the shepherds from all the surrounding villages hast-

ened to bring their flocks down to the valley before the storms and avalanches made it impossible for them to come through without the loss of many thousands of heads. As all the shepherds were good weather prophets and always waited until the last possible moment, they almost all began their exodus at once, and, for a day or two, the roads became almost impassable, being crowded with hundreds of thousands of cattle. All carriages and horseback riders tried to keep off the roads during those days, because the sheep became at times unmanageable. One of the leaders would become frightened and would get between the horses' legs, and at once dozens of sheep would rush to that place, pushing and butting the horses, frightening them, and often lifting them off their feet. Besides, the shepherds were helped to drive the cattle by hundreds of fierce-looking shepherd dogs of an unusual breed, peculiar to those places. Those dogs were trained not to make friends with strangers, and, because they were always half starved, were known also to become unmanageable and attack horses and even people.

Because of all these dangers, the Vassenbachs were advised to watch the sight from the flat roof of one of the houses in the village. Soon

after eleven o'clock, the first flock appeared on the road. "Oh, look at them, Mother," cried Olia. "Have you ever seen such funny-looking sheep? Why, they are most of them light brown, instead of being white, like ours."

"And did you see their faces?" said Misha. "They are white and are covered with freckles."

Everybody laughed, because the small brown spots which covered the white faces of the Caucasian sheep looked just like freckles.

"What interests me," remarked the Countess, "is that they don't separate the sheep from the goats. Look how many goats are among them." Indeed, there were at least half as many goats in the herd as sheep and rams. The guide explained that, not only the goats' milk was used in quantities for making cheese, but that the goats were tame, and useful in steadying the sheep. They were also very valuable, of a special breed, with tufts of long, woolly hair growing all over their backs and necks; these tufts sold for big money, because they made the best and softest kind of wool for *bashliks*.

Olia and Misha were very much interested in dogs. They could not believe that those beautiful cream-colored animals could be ferocious or dangerous, and when they saw the first

donkey whose saddlebags were full of cunning-looking puppies, white and fluffy, too young to travel on foot, they would not be contented until their father promised them one apiece. He kept his promise, because the guide explained to him that, if brought up with the family from puppyhood and fed well, those dogs would grow up good-natured and would make faithful and intelligent companions and watchful guardians for the children.

Count Vassenbach bought three of these dogs, and there came a time when he was glad that he had kept his promise and had given Misha a dog and a friend who brought him safely through a very grave danger.

That winter passed quietly and smoothly without many striking incidents. Misha spent a good deal of time with Captain Medvedeff and his wife, who taught him his three R's. Olia stayed a great deal with her mother or with Niania and the younger children. Father often tried to take her on long rides or walks with him, but she was as timid as ever, which irritated her father so that her mother begged of him to leave the child in her care.

In the middle of the winter, an incident occurred which, though at the time almost un-

noticed, proved to be a turning point in Misha's life and changed all his future. An entertainment was given in honor of one of the grand dukes, a navy official, who was staying in the city of Tiflis. One of the numbers on the programme was a Russian dance by Olia and Misha. Both were very good dancers, and both enjoyed it, but after the dance, Olia, with her usual timidity, ran away and hid in a corner, whereas Misha preferred to stay in the big ball-room, mingling with the guests, eagerly listening to their praises, and asking, as was his custom, innumerable questions of any one who was willing to listen to him and to satisfy his curiosity. He soon noticed that a tall, distinguished-looking admiral was standing alone near the window.

"Are you the Grand Duke for whom I danced?" asked Misha.

"Yes, I suppose I am. Do you like to dance?"

"Yes, I do, do you?" said Misha.

"Not very much, I'd rather sail than dance, any time."

"I like to sail too," said Misha.

"Have you ever sailed?"

"Oh, yes, lots and lots of times in the nursery. Olia and I, we put a rug on two chairs, and we

sail and sail and sail, and I rock the chairs, and sometimes we fall out. But Olia doesn't like to fall out, she says it isn't ladylike."

The Grand Duke laughed and said to Misha, "What are you going to be when you grow up?"

"An admiral," said Misha promptly. "I like your uniform."

"Well, you have to learn a lot and study hard to be an admiral," said the Grand Duke.

"Oh, that's all right. I can study, and I know a lot already," said Misha promptly and with conviction.

"Well, if you know such a lot, I think we had better not lose sight of you," said the Grand Duke. "Do you want to come to my navy school?"

"Course I do," said Misha just as promptly. "Shall we start now?" He was always ready for immediate action.

"No, you have to grow a bit older before you can go to that school," said the Grand Duke. "But I am going to enter you right now"; and calling one of his adjutants, he told him to take down Misha's name and address and to enroll him as a special pupil in the Imperial Navy School.

"Well, I'll see you by and by, young man," said he to Misha. "Don't you forget me."

"No," said Misha, "and don't you forget me. I'll give you something to remember me by. Niania says that people will always remember you if you give this to them." And he fished out of his pocket a dirty little piece of fur.

"Thanks," said the Duke. "Do you mind telling me what it is?"

"Oh, that's a piece of hare's leg," said Misha. "You must find a hare that is pure white in summer, not cross-eyed, and whose hind legs are shorter than the fore legs. Then you catch him, then you kill him, then you keep his legs for good luck."

"That is fine," said the Grand Duke. "I am sure I am much obliged to you. And what would you like me to give to you?"

"Well, I don't know. Perhaps you had better give me that cross," and he indicated the diamond cross given to the Grand Duke by the Emperor, for a great service done to the country.

"Sorry, I can't give you that," said the Grand Duke, "but here, take this star and keep it until you have earned the right to wear it."

When Misha told his father and mother about

the incident, they laughed a good deal over it, explained to him the significance of the Star of St. Andrew, an emblem of long and faithful service, and did not pay much attention to Misha's declaration that he was going to be an admiral. Boylike, of course, he forgot to mention that he had been enrolled by one of the adjutants. So, when, several years later, an official document came, notifying Count Vassenbach that it was time to enter his son, Misha, in the Navy School, it came as a bombshell, because no one in the family ever entered navy service, and because neither the Count nor Countess believed in sending a child away from home at such an early age. But royal summons could not be ignored, and so Misha entered the Navy School before he was twelve years old, and in due time became an admiral, with the right to wear the Star of St. Andrew.

CHAPTER VIII

‘TROUBLES WELL MET



WITH the advent of summer, this most happy life in Count Vassenbach's household changed to the succession of one unpleasant event after another. First of all, the heat began to take

hold of the members of the family, and of the servants unaccustomed to the climate. There were rumors of typhus and cholera brought in by traveling merchants and beggars of all nationalities, who always swarmed in hundreds through Tiflis as soon as the Darial pass was open. At first, the cases of illness were infrequent, and found only among the native population in the old part of the town. But ignorance

and lack of sanitary precautions made it possible for the contagion to spread like wildfire through all the city and the country.

The obstinacy and insubordination of the soldiers who sneaked into the quarantined parts of the town, and who tried to hide from the army officials those who became ill, made it possible for the ravage of the disease to claim many victims, first among the soldiers and then among the officers and their families. At first, the funerals became a daily occurrence, then were counted by tens and scores in a day, and as the road to the cemetery led by the house of Count Vassenbach, the funeral processions became there a very common sight, and would have passed unnoticed if it had not been for the military music, to which officers and soldiers had to be buried. The tune of the funeral march got so on the nerves of the Countess that, combined with her worry for the safety of her children and the Count, it made her lose sleep. She could not eat, and in her weakened condition, she herself soon became a victim of the disease.

There were no nurses to be had, female help of any kind was very scarce, the few doctors were overworked beyond their strength. Medicine and proper food were not available. Some

of the native tribes, maddened by the ravages of the disease and by the wild rumors that the Russians had sent the disease to exterminate them all, again became unruly, and the traffic on the military road became not only dangerous but almost impossible, because of the robbers and the constant hold-ups.

So the Countess lay there delirious, at the mercy of the male servants, mostly soldiers, who did their best in taking care of her. Her faithful friend and helper Lubasha was deathly ill herself, and there was no one in the house but old Niania to look after the children and to keep them away from the sick mother. Niania kept watch over Nusha and Leva, and Captain Medvedeff did his best to entertain Misha, but no one seemed to think of Olia and, little by little, it was accepted by everyone that she spend most of her time in the sick room of her mother, trying to take care of her, caressing her, and crying in despair while listening to her wild delirium. How the child had escaped being taken ill herself was beyond all understanding, and everyone, Olia herself most of all, afterward accepted the Countess's explanation that God had helped her and watched over her, because she, in turn, was needed to save her mother's life.

Long afterward, however, Olia often wondered how much she really contributed toward saving her mother's life, because she not only was not old enough to carry out doctors' directions, but, on the contrary, she used to smuggle in fruit, bread, butter, and other dainties, which the doctor had strictly forbidden, but which her mother constantly begged for in her delirium, and which Olia would bring to her, hidden under her little apron, so that no one could see what she was doing.

But whether in spite of or because of Olia's misdirected, well-intentioned ministrations, the Countess pulled through her very desperate attack of typhoid fever and the two relapses, and came back to life emaciated, weak, and not caring whether she lived or died. The heat had become so intense that all who could, fled from the afflicted city. Captain Medvedeff and Count Vassenbach decided that it was high time to move their two patients and the children out of town into the mountains, where the air was cool and invigorating. It was a hard undertaking for the two men to get ready and to move two sick women and four small children and get them safely through the dangerous and nar-

row passes in the mountains, where bandits and thieves were always lying in ambush.

But it had to be done, and it was done.

The two women were carried on stretchers, the children on mules, and the whole procession was surrounded by a company of soldiers who kept their guns loaded and their eyes and their ears constantly on the alert. After five hours of slow and tedious journeying, they finally reached the little settlement, consisting of three *aouls*, and a big shed for the cattle, only recently occupied by the shepherds and their flocks, but now vacated in favor of the Count and his family in consideration of a "certain sum of money, two hundred head of sheep, twenty goats, five mules, and a camel," as was chanted by a native justice of the peace, lawyer, and scribe combined, while the Count and his landlord were shaking hands on the bargain and going through a very elaborate ceremony of giving over and of receiving the property.

In the cool, invigorating mountain air and the quiet of the country, both invalids began to improve very rapidly.

Lubashenka was the first one to recover completely and to take the reins of the household

into her capable hands, thus relieving Count Vassenbach from many cares and responsibilities.

But Natasha, although soon out of danger, was still very weak and nervous. She had to spend most of her days lying on a comfortable soft couch which Count Vassenbach had moved into a sheltered corner in the almond grove.

Both Count Vassenbach and the army doctor, who spent their week-ends at the *aoul*, were very hopeful that the air and the appetizing food prepared by Lubashenka would soon restore Countess Natalia to her former health. But Lubashenka soon began to suspect that Natasha was worried and unhappy about something.

"Nonsense," exclaimed Count Vassenbach to whom she spoke of it. "Natasha is as happy as a lark. She laughs every minute that I am here."

"Yes, but have you ever noticed how she begins to droop the moment you are ready to leave."

"Of course she does," answered Count Vassenbach, "of course she does. The very thought of parting makes us both feel unhappy and sad. You see, we both happen to care for each other and for each other's company."

But this somewhat fatuous reply failed to reassure Lubashenka, and she decided to take matters into her own hands.

And so, one day, when she again saw traces of tears on Natalie's face, instead of pretending not to see them, she came over and boldly asked, "Natashenka, my dear, what ails you? What makes you so unhappy?"

Countess Natalie's eyes filled again but she tried to ignore it.

"Nothing—at all—ails me," she stammered in a small voice which she tried in vain to steady. "I am v-v-very happy, Lubashenka, I——" but the rest of it was lost in a sob.

Lubashenka knelt near the couch and gently put her arms around Natasha. "Tell me, dear, what worries you."

"I cannot—I am ashamed——"

"Ashamed to tell to your own old faithful friend? Come, come, my little soul, tell me what is wrong."

Natalie, unnerved by the soft, sympathetic voice, gave up the struggle and sobbed out, "Everything is wrong, everything. I am—I could not stand another illness—here, all alone with you. And Kolinka will be killed too—I know that those brutes, the Tchetchenzi, have

sworn to get him. I often dream of him dead—with the bullet in his head—and they will capture my children—and kill them too. Oh, it is terrible, terrible. I cannot sleep nights from the horror of it, and when I am awake I think only of that—only of that. Even when Kolia is here and I laugh with him and pretend to be gay and happy, it is always there!—always there!—gnawing at my heart, filling me with terror. And there is no one to help us, no one to shield us! Oh, Lubashenka, Lubashenka, how can you look so calm when we all will soon be dead!” and Natasha dropped back on the pillows, gasping for breath, shaken by sobs and shuddering from head to foot.

Lubashenka, though terrified by this sudden torrent of sobs and lamentations, outwardly remained perfectly calm. She did not try to stop Natasha, but stayed by her, gently patting her head, rubbing her ice-cold hands and crooning over her as over a sick baby:

“There, there, darling, there, there, heart of my soul. Cry all you want, do not mind me—do not mind an old woman who has lived through many unhappy hours. Cry, darling, cry—it will do you good! Cry, my baby, cry my pet! . . .”

When Natasha finally stopped sobbing and lay there spent and weak, Lubashenka stole gently toward the house and soon returned with a bowl of steaming milk sweetened with a very generous amount of sugar.

"Drink it, darling, drink it all. I put in a lot of sugar, because sugar is said to calm our nerves and strengthen our hearts. And the hot milk will make you sleep like a baby."

Natasha drank obediently, like a tired child, and soon was fast asleep from sheer exhaustion.

For a day or two after that, Lubashenka watched Natasha carefully, but never referred to the strange episode. Then, one evening, after the children were in bed, she tucked Natasha snugly among the cushions and the rugs on the roof of the *aoul*, where they often spent their evenings.

"How soft and balmy is the air," said Natasha.

"Yes, and how starry the sky. My mother used to say that every star is a candle that the angels light in God's heavenly temple every time that someone somewhere lights one for Him in a church on earth." And after a long silence:

"Natasha, what made you break down like

that the other day? Don't tell me, if you'd rather not, but I think it would be better to talk it over with someone and not to keep it hidden away inside of you."

"I should like to tell you—if I could."

"Why cannot you?"

"Oh, I am ashamed to be such a baby."

"What baby—a cry-baby?"

"Yes, a cry-baby and a coward. I am afraid, I am afraid all the time that something dreadful will happen to us, and no one can prevent it. No one—no one—no one!"

And with every repetition of the word her voice grew higher and shriller, ready to break, and her hands began to shake and twitch and twist nervously the corner of her lace shawl.

Lubashenka, alarmed at these danger signals, quietly put her own hand on Natasha's and said firmly:

"You are blaspheming, Natasha. You have forgotten our Father, the God Almighty. You have forgotten Him, Who can help and shield you and yours from any danger. Pray to Him, child, pray to save you from the evil forces working in you."

"Oh, I have prayed," answered Natasha rebelliously, "but God would not listen to me; He

has forgotten us. Everybody has forgotten us, here in exile, away from all home ties, from all our old friends."

Lubashenka sadly shook her head. The situation was even worse than she suspected. But she was ready for the emergency.

"Natashenka," she said, gently caressing her darling, "Natashenka, I am only an old stupid woman who can do nothing but sympathize with you. But I know of someone, a wise, saintly man who lives not far from here and to whom all who are in trouble go for advice. Won't you go to him, too?"

"Who is he? Some dirty freak, like Dushan, who fooled people for three years, pretending to be a hermit, a saint, and all the time he was harboring the thieves and the smugglers? You remember what a lot of contraband they found in his cave when he was surrounded and arrested last month."

"Oh, no, no! Father Boris is nothing like that. He is a great and saintly man, indeed. He has lived here for more than thirty years. They say he was a great Russian prince, very rich and very learned. But he was also a great sinner, a very, very wicked man. He denounced God and mocked His Holy Church, he deceived

his wife, he flogged and tortured his serfs, and then God visited His just wrath on him. His beautiful wife, his mother, his father, and all his many children were stricken by plague, and all died within one week. His serfs rose against him, set the house on fire while he lay there ill with the fever, and all fled to the woods. An old faithful servant barely succeeded in saving his master's life, dragging him out of the palace through such scorching heat that every hair on their heads and faces was singed, their clothing smoldering, and their hands and faces all blistered. The valet died, but the Prince finally recovered, after a long, long illness. But he was a changed man. God and the Holy Virgin visited him in his illness and showed him a vision of hell and all its tortures awaiting the unrepentant sinner. They also showed him the vision of heavenly bliss and promised him forgiveness if he should repent."

Here Lubashenka had to stop for breath and to wipe the tears rolling down her cheek. Countess Natasha was also sobbing and her eyes were big and round with fear.

"And then? Go on, Lubashenka, what had happened then?"

“And then, they say that many of those around him were so frightened that they repented and went to church and confessed their sins and took communion to make their peace with God.”

“But what of the Prince?”

“Oh, a miracle happened to the Prince. One day, he was as usual moaning and groaning, and all at once he sat up in bed and stretched out his arms and cried out, ‘Have mercy on me, Lord, let me get well, and I will spend the rest of my days praising Thee and doing Thy will.’ And he cried it out three times, and then”—her voice became a mysterious whisper, so low that Natasha had to move close to her to catch what she was about to say—“and then a wonderful light appeared through the window; everyone in the room could see it; and that light reached his face and shone on it, and for a long time he sat like that, as if turned into a statue, and one knew that he was seeing a beautiful vision because his face began to look happier and happier. And all at once he sang out, ‘Glory be to Lord Almighty Who took mercy on me, wicked, sinful man. Glory be to God Almighty! Glory be to God Almighty!’—Just like that—‘Glory be to God Almighty!’ And then he fell back

as if dead. But he was only in a deep sleep. And he slept for thirty-six hours. For thirty-six hours! A night and a day and another night. And then he woke up strong and well. But he was a changed man, a changed man, I tell you."

"How a changed man?"

"He was as meek as a lamb and as humble as a serf. He rewarded richly all those who had nursed him back to health, gave all his serfs, even those who had plotted against him, freedom and some land, asked them to forgive him all his past cruelties in the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, and bowed to them low, beating his brow on the floor before them even as they were in the habit of bowing before him. He sold all his property, and built in the near-by town a beautiful church with richly bejeweled ikons in the altar and scenes from the last Day of Judgment painted on the walls. A very great artist painted them, and they were so gruesome that little children cried from fright if they happened to look at them.

"After that, he made a vow to wander for ten years all through Russia, from one monastery to another, on foot, barefooted and bareheaded, begging his daily bread and sleeping in the

open, and spending in each holy place two nights and two days in prayer, without food or sleep.

"He came here more than thirty years ago, and has ever since lived in a cave in the mountains, sleeping on the bare floor and living on bread and water and fruits. He never leaves his cave except to visit the dying who send for him. But people flock to him from all over the country, because his fame as the most saintly man living has spread far, and he is known to have performed many miracles."

"Who told you all that, Lubashenka?"

"Oh, a good many people. I never mentioned it to you for fear that you or your husband would laugh at me. But I feel that the time has arrived when Father Boris can help you, if you would but go to him."

Countess Vassenbach was very much impressed but still undecided. "What will Kolia say? You know how he always makes fun of all the hermits and saints. He does not believe in them, and he would not like my going to one of them for help."

"Count Vassenbach is a very good man, but he is still blind to many paths in our spiritual life. Do not say anything to him about it until

you have seen Father Boris and judged for yourself."

"Yes, I think I will do it. When can we go to him?"

"He is expecting you to-morrow and will try to be alone when we come. But we must start very early, with the daybreak."

Lubov Nikolaevna was evidently so sure of her success that she had all the arrangements completed, and the little expedition started, as planned, very early next morning.

Olia was very anxious to see Father Boris, of whom she had also heard, and Misha was safer with them than left on Niania's hands, so they both were taken along.

CHAPTER IX

FATHER BORIS



FATHER BORIS was a tall, gaunt man with long hair, bushy eyebrows, and a beard reaching almost to his knees and greenish white with age. But his small, deeply set gray

eyes and his ready smile were so young and kindly that even the shy and reserved Olia was at once attracted to him. He moved very slowly, bent almost double, as if under some unseen burden, and at every step he took, the chains which he wore both under and over his hair-cloth shirt clanked and hit him with many short heavy ends hanging loose.

He patted both children on the head, asked

God to bless them, and then motioned to Lubashenka to take them away. "Let us sit here, in the sun," he said to Natasha, laying his thin, wrinkled hand over her firm white one. "Let us sit here where we shall be uninterrupted, and you can tell me all about your troubles." Natalia Lvowna did not mean to tell all her troubles to a perfect stranger, but almost before she knew what she was doing, she opened her heart to him, even more so than she had to Lubashenka.

Father Boris did not say very much, did not ask many questions, but he seemed to understand her better than she understood herself. "So you are homesick, poor child, always tired, always worried. . . . Life holds no joy for you? No, of course not; how could it? . . . The fear of death is growing in you, too. . . . Yes, yes. . . . Poor child, poor soul! So many of us fret and worry and fear death so much that we forget to enjoy life while it lasts. We say that we believe in God and in His Heaven, and yet we cry and mourn when He takes one of our dear ones into His fold.

"Sleepless nights, you say—bad dreams—yes, yes. . . . Idle hands at daytime bring bad dreams at night. . . . Have you any neighbors? No neighbors at all? Hm! . . . Hm!

. . . I thought there were quite a few people living around here. Nice people, too—mothers and old women and little children—yes—yes.”

The shadows of the evening were gathering in the valleys when Lubashenka came at last to see if the conference were over. She and the children had had their lunch and a nap and a long walk, and now they were all ready for home and for the evening meal. They found Countess Vassenbach all ready to start, her face smiling, her hands and pockets full of little packages.

“What are they, Mamma?” asked Misha.

“Seeds, all kinds of seeds, Mishenka, we are going to plant them in our garden to-morrow.”

“Mamma,” came timidly from Olia, “what did Father Boris say to you to make you look so happy? Your eyes are shining and your voice sounds as if you were going to laugh and sing.”

“I certainly feel like laughing and singing.” And to Lubashenka, “Oh, what a man! What a wonderful, wonderful man! He did not say much. I did most of the talking. But my heart is as light as if someone had taken out of it a big piece of lead and poured in some elixir of

life, and joy, and youth. And do you know why, Lubashenka? Because he made me see that at the bottom of my unhappiness were selfishness and idleness."

Lubashenka resented that. Even the saintly father had no right to call her darling selfish. She shook her head. "You, selfish!"

"Yes. And I lack in faith. I say I believe in God and pray to Him, and yet I was afraid to trust Him to take care of us, I was afraid that He, who had created the whole world and took care of it for thousands of years would not be able to take care of me and mine in sickness or in health. Oh, Lubashenka, what a sinner of little faith I have been! But it is all gone now. I shall say, 'Thy will be done, O Lord, and I will stop worrying.'"

Lubashenka's eyes were full of tears but she looked as happy and elated as the Countess. "Oh, my dear, my dear, I am so glad we came. I knew Father Boris would help you."

"Yes, and he told me to come again soon. He has much to tell me about my garden and the people whom I can help, and about many, many other things."

[That and the next week-end, Count Vassen-

bach was detained in town, but when he and the doctor came three weeks later, they scarcely recognized Natasha in the vigorous, sunburned, rosy-cheeked woman whom they found in the garden digging and planting and weeding, her fingers almost as soiled and her laughter as hearty as those of the children who were all helping her. Even the baby was making holes and planting in them stones and sticks, gurgling happily and showing to Father her "pitty-pitty gagen."

And then came the enthusiastic report about Father Boris and about the visits to him. Count Vassenbach was on the point of making some disparaging remarks about "the *urodivi*," but the doctor shook his head warningly and afterward advised the Count, not only not to kill Natasha's enthusiasm, but on the contrary to encourage her in her efforts to regain the almost lost happiness.

"Why should you kill in her the faith which gives her joy and strength to live? How do you know whether she is right or wrong? What better thing can you give her in return? . . . You don't want her to visit any fakers? . . . How do you know that he is an impostor?

What has he said or done except that which was high and noble and gave the Countess health and moral strength, a better and larger outlook on life? I am an old hardened cynic, but even I have to bow my head before the inexplicable moral force of this man. Why should you condemn and forbid without knowing the facts and the man?"

So Count Vassenbach compromised on going to see that "quack" for himself. He went ready to mock and criticize, but returned very much impressed by Father Boris's sincerity, tolerance, deep knowledge of human nature, and understanding of how to deal with it. If any one did a little mocking, it was Father Boris himself. Count Vassenbach's eyes wavered several times, and his face flushed angrily once or twice when Father Boris quietly pointed out to him the inconsistency of some of his statements and the arbitrary way in which he tried to regulate, not only his wife's conduct, but even her thoughts and beliefs. Father Boris also remarked on Count Vassenbach's total lack of any convictions or knowledge in matters of religion. "So you want your wife to believe in God but not overdo it? You would like her to keep God's commandments, but only as far as convenient to

you? 'Thou shalt not steal' suits you, but when it comes to 'loving thy neighbor as thyself,' you prefer her not to go too far and to remember her social position? You would like, of course, to have her believe in God, but you insist on her serving and obeying you first? No, do not scowl and clench your fists. You have come to me to 'find out the truth about it all'—you are finding it out, are you not? Only it lies in a different direction than you had expected, and it hits you hard, so you are getting angry. My son, your quick temper is your worst enemy. It blinds you to the rights of others and it lowers your dignity far more than your wife's digging in the garden or visiting with the natives. Your wife is a proud woman, and will never debase herself or you in any way. But she is a Christian first, and she has learned to humble herself in the eyes of God, and to do His work in His vineyard. And He has rewarded her by giving her peace of mind, happiness of soul, and health of body. Do not spoil His gifts by your selfishness and false pride. Give her a chance. Love and protect her, but do not bind and gag her with your narrow-minded conventions, just because you think that she is safer when she is not permitted to think and act for herself. Be

a lover, be a good husband to her, not a tyrant, a jailer. Think it over, my son, and see if I am not right."

It was all said so kindly, with such a friendly twinkle in the eyes and such an engaging smile that even the haughty, quick-tempered Count, used to command and not to take orders, could not resent the daring criticism. Was he really inclined to be tyrannical and overbearing where he meant only to be wise and protecting? A very unusual train of thoughts for him.

CHAPTER X

STRANGE GARDENS



O TO her great surprise, Natasha was not only permitted, but encouraged by her husband to continue her visits to the hermit and to follow her own inclinations in mapping out her

life. And what a happy and full life it had become! Both Natasha and the children enjoyed working in the garden, planning, planting, pruning, and weeding. An old soldier who used to be a gardener and whom Count Vassenbach had detailed to his household, did all the heavy work and also advised and directed. It was hard for him at times to keep a straight face when the children and even Countess Nat-

alie herself gave orders which betrayed their ignorance. Thus Countess Natalie ordered him to transplant the potatoes to a sunnier place because they had blossomed "ever so long ago and yet the round balls on the branches were still small in size and perfectly green." Olia wanted him to get her some macaroni bushes, because she loved macaroni, and Misha told her that it grew on bushes. But old Stepan was patient and tactful, and little by little he passed on to the family some of his knowledge, and a good deal of his love for plants and flowers. "They are like children," he used to say: "You give them food, you give them drink, and maybe they will grow and maybe they won't. But give them sunshine and love, and they cannot help themselves. When Christ was a child, He used to dig in the garden, and He loved the plants, and they grew for him."

"How do you know, Stepan?" would ask the children.

"Because it is in the book."

"What book?"

"Don't you know what book? The holy book that the priest reads on holidays."

"What flowers?" asked Misha.

"Oh, roses and pansies and heartsease and

lady's slippers," answered Stepan, rather vaguely and at random. He had been told once by a sub-deacon that the Christ Child was "tending the garden," and that was enough for him. But it did not satisfy Misha. "I have never heard Father Priest read about flowers, have you, Olia?" Olia had to admit that she never had.

"Then tell it to Stepan."

"What for?"

"What for? So that he will know the truth."

"But why should he?"

"Why, Olia, would you like to live and not know the truth?"

Olia pondered awhile over his question. Misha's questions were often peculiar, but one had to take them seriously. "I do believe that I should rather not know the truth if it is not pleasant or makes people sad. It would make Stepan very sad to think that Christ Child never loved flowers."

"Oh, you 'fraid cat, you are just afraid of Stepan."

"No, I am not."

"Then tell him."

"What for?"

"So that he will know the truth."

"But it will hurt him."

"You are just afraid."

And so the argument went on and on, each combatant feeling that he was right and neither being able to make the other see it. At last, Olia, who hated arguments—they always made her head ache—gave in and went to Stepan, who was working on his hands and knees over a sickly-looking little plant which he was trying to save. "Stepan," said Olga timidly, "Stepan, there is nothing in the Bible about roses and pansies."

"We do not believe that Jesus ever had a garden," piped in Misha.

Stepan got up stiffly, holding on to his rheumatic knees and looking at the children as if dazed, "Christ had no garden?" He impatiently wiped off the sweat rolling down his forehead and into his small, blurry eyes. "Had no garden? Indeed he did. The Holy Bible says so. You hear it in church."

"No, the Bible never said so. I have not heard of it in church. I do not believe that Christ had a garden," insisted Misha.

Stepan looked at Misha, scratched his head, took his short-stemmed pipe filled with *mahorka*

(cheap, ill-smelling native tobacco) out of his toothless mouth, looked again at Misha, and all at once his eyes blazed, though his hands trembled. He was filled with the fury of a fanatic wounded in his dearest belief. "Christ had no garden! You little antichrist, just because you cannot understand the old Slavic church language that the Bible is written in, you dare say that Christ never had a garden. You little infidel, you little Tartar, you see if God does not punish you!"

Now it was Misha's turn to explode, "Thou dirty Hamm, thou moujik, thou shaved-head [soldier] how dare thee talk like that to me, *a count*? I will tell Father on thee! I will have thee shot for high treason."

"God is higher than a count," was Stepan's retort.

"Thou impudent worm, thou . . ."

"Misha, Misha, you must not talk like that to our nice Stepan. Stop, Misha. We do believe in Christ's garden, Stepan, indeed we do! At least I do," said Olia conciliatorily. "Please do not mind him, Stepan."

But all the animation was gone from Stepan's face, now ashen gray. "Forgive me, little

Barin," he said, "I had some vodka to-day, and the heat and the wine must have gone to my head." And he fell at Misha's feet trying to kiss his boots.

"Get up," said Misha gruffly. "May God forgive you as I do."* He was almost crying himself, the hot-headed, good-hearted Misha. He patted Stepan on his bent back and ran away.

Olia followed him. "Well, I suppose you are happy now that you have made me tell him."

"He was not hurt as you said he would be," answered Misha defiantly. "He was just mad. Besides, he did not believe you."

"Then what was the good of telling him?"

"So that he would know the truth."

"But he did not believe the truth, and besides——"

But Misha had lost all interest in the argument; he had spied a red butterfly. Red butterflies were very rare, whereas arguments with Olia were all too common. So he ran after the butterfly, leaving Olia with her unsolved dilemma and the beginning of a headache.

Countess Natasha noticed Olia's paleness and her increasing headaches on the slightest provocation, and decided to consult Father Boris

*A stereotyped phrase of forgiveness.

about them some time—before long. In the meantime, there were so many other things to consult him about.

In a very short time, Countess Natalie found herself deeply involved in the affairs of the neighborhood—and not a very near neighborhood at that. The nearest village was three miles off. Her fame as a healer and adviser and a friend of Father Boris's had spread far and wide among the natives, and her yard was constantly filled with women and children who needed her help, except on the days when Count Vassenbach was there. The women were afraid of him and felt his dislike of them. But Countess Natalie enjoyed her new rôle of a mother to them all. She found, to her amazement, that she really liked those women, ignorant and helpless as they were; she enjoyed listening to their joys and was sorry for their misfortunes. Her work among them, begun as a deed of charity, had become a work of love, not so much of God as of the individuals who needed her. She wrote in her diary:

“I would almost say that those women are my friends though, of course, I remember how much lower is their station in life than mine.

Father Boris says that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ, but, no doubt, he means it only as a religious saying. Even Misha feels instinctively his superiority over the common people. I had to smile when I overheard him the other day upbraiding old Stepan for speaking to him as if they were equals. Olia lacks breeding in this respect, I am sorry to say. She is very proud, but she is timid, and when frightened, agrees with any one, even her inferiors, if they happen to intimidate her. There are here several Circassian and Georgian families of royal descent, and with them I can visit on equal footing. They are all illiterate, and most of them are fat and coarse, the older women, I mean. The young ones are slender, graceful, and very, very handsome. But their youth does not last long. They marry at fourteen, and at twenty look old and haggard. But they all know well the history and the legends of their country, which are very interesting. I am writing it all down, and I am trying to collect as much material as I can. Nicholas says that he hopes I am not going to become a bluestocking and write a book. How absurd! I would not even think of it. But some of their customs are weird and worth writing down.

“For instance, when a woman has a new-born baby, all her friends come to see her the very first day. She is laid out in state, wearing her best embroidered robes and covered with every blanket that she possesses. And that in the sweltering heat, when even my lightest dresses seem too hot. The richer the family, the more blankets the woman will have. Some of them have as many as forty or fifty! And they are all spread out over her. Just think of it! When I went to see Princess Nashakulian, a wife of one of the richest men here, I had a hard time discovering her under the pile of blankets reaching almost to the ceiling: beautiful silk, woollen, and velvet blankets, most of them lined and interlined and quilted. Small wonder that the poor woman was completely exhausted and could not even keep her eyes open. The room was full of guests, all the windows were closed tight, and the heavy breath of garlic-eating visitors made me positively sick. So one of the women almost forced me to chew a little garlic, and after that I stopped noticing the odor. But I hope I will not have to make indoor calls very often. I would much rather sit on their flat roofs, listening to their stories and songs.

“Would it not be terrible if having a baby

born to me here, I should be forced to have its head bandaged tight to make it grow into the sugar-loaf shape, as natives do, and if I should have to lie all day long under numerous blankets! According to the importance of our families, both Kolia's and mine, and according to our wealth, the number of blankets would have to reach, I am afraid, into the hundreds. We would have to take off the roof of the house to make room for the pile of blankets."

Countess Natasha closed her diary and put it away, still smiling at that whimsical thought of hers.

CHAPTER XI

THE NEW BABY SISTER, TAMARA



LESS than a month later, she did have a baby born to her — a sweet little girl with big brown eyes and a lot of dark, curly hair, “the longest hair one had ever seen on a baby,” said Lubashenka.

“She looks like a native,” said Count Vassenbach.

“Yes,” replied Natasha, “she looks like a native princess. I want to call her Tamara.”

“For the beautiful and virtuous Queen Tamara?” asked Olia, who had been fascinated by the stories and legends about Princess Tamara, the wise and beautiful girl who lived in the Caucasus in the Sixteenth Century, and who

grew up to be a most famous queen, ruling long and successfully over many tribes. She was so wise and so brave that she never lost a battle. In times of war, she always led her armies, conquering all her foes and adding their lands to her own. In the time of peace, she made wise laws for her country, spun and embroidered beautiful tapestries, and had built for herself a beautiful castle with terraces and gardens, with drawbridges and high walls. The ruins of that castle still existed and could be seen from the roofs of the Vassenbach's *aouls*. She ruled her people so wisely that all her subjects, even the conquered hostile tribes, worshiped her and would give their lives for her. Poets made songs about her, wandering minstrels sang them all over the world, beggars even now asked help in her name, and traveling story-tellers could entertain people by the hour relating incidents of her goodness, wisdom, and bravery. Many a knight had killed himself because she would not return his love, so many, in fact, that all the rivers around the castle were kept busy carrying their bodies into the sea. And wherever a floating body of an unhappy lover touched the shore, there immediately grew up a high bush covered with lovely fragrant red flowers—"a

flame of love," the natives called it. And though she had been dead a good many years, her name had never died. No one could live in the Caucasus very long without learning songs and hearing stories about Queen Tamara. The timid, quiet Olia often imagined herself as Princess Tamara, brave, beautiful, undaunted, unafraid, sure in a saddle, witty at repartee, never embarrassed in meeting strangers.

Even Misha had heard and dreamed a good deal about the lovely queen "riding a snow-white steed and leading her armies from victory to victory." In their house hung a picture of Queen Tamara, her hair flowing, her eyes blazing, her right arm raised to throw a rose to a victorious knight shown in the distance as piercing with his sword a conquered foe of the Queen.

So Misha became quite excited when Lubashenka called him to come in to see his mother and Tamara. He gave his mother a hearty but a very brief hug, glanced perfunctorily at the little bundle at his mother's side, and not seeing any one else except Lubashenka, asked impatiently. "Well, where is Queen Tamara?"

"Why, there she is," answered Lubashenka, "there she is, your darling new sister Tamara."

"Oh, that," said Misha disdainfully, "that—that—that funny little thing, why that bundle is no more Queen Tamara than our Stepan is the Tsar of Russia. I think you are all mean to make fun of me like that! And to-day is not April Fool's day, either!" He stamped his foot in a sudden fit of anger and ran out of the room. For a long time after that, he would not look at his baby sister and would not call her Tamara. Queen Tamara had for a long time been secretly the lady of his dreams, "a beautiful woman with eyes as bright as the stars and deep as the night, with face as white as a lily and as pink as a rose, with a mouth as red as a pomegranate and with long black curls touching the ground as she walked." To call this funny, wrinkled, red-faced baby Tamara was a sacrilege. No one ever guessed what had made him so angry. He did not quite understand it himself. He only knew that he would never call this funny bundle "Tamara." So he nicknamed her "Tiewk" (a bundle) and the nickname stuck for many years.

Leva, then a flabby, puny, lifeless child of not quite six, dutifully kissed his "new baby sister," poked his finger into her eyes to see whether she could close them, and cuddled up to his mother, begging for a story. The little

Nusha just gurgled, as was her habit, "pitty, pitty baby," and went on sucking a piece of toast.

But Olia poured out on the little newcomer all the abundance of love that had accumulated in her ever since she had been told that she was too old to play with dolls and must amuse herself with the pets. Olia was afraid of all the pets given to her—the dogs, the parrot, and the horses. Even the chickens terrified her since one of them had inadvertently pecked her on the eye. Cats she positively abhorred, and a little mouse which Misha had caught and tamed made her scream and hide. Even the sight of harmless bugs and caterpillars sent shivers up and down her spine. But little Tamara was so wonderful—so soft and warm, and so helpless. Olia could sit by the hour watching her sleep, happy to have a chance to render her the least service. Once she had even dared to brush off a spider who dropped on the crib and started crawling toward the baby's face. It is true that Olia took a piece of paper to brush him off, and trembled all over while doing it, and had one of her bad headaches all that day. But still she had done it—brushed off the spider. And she did not care whether or not the world knew.

how brave she was. Forgotten were the banished dolls, the unwelcome pets, and even the beloved fairy tales. Never particularly anxious to play with her brothers their strenuous and often rough games, Olia now absolutely and firmly refused to impersonate for them a horse or a mule, or a Persian merchant, or even Scheherazade telling to the Sultan and his court the wonderful stories of the Orient. Both boys equally bitterly resented the loss of their meek and submissive playmate, but they bore the loss in a very different manner. Misha raged and scolded at first, but soon got over it and bore no grudge either against Olia or Tamara. For him the world was too full of joys and adventures to waste any time on useless regrets.

Leva sulked and whimpered and never quite forgave either sister for causing him annoyance, and took his revenge in mean, underhand ways: Olia's bed seemed to become all at once a favorite hiding place to all kinds of bugs and caterpillars, and even lizards, so that poor Olia never dared to go to bed without having Lubashenka or Niania pull her bed all to pieces and carefully shake the sheets and the blankets and examine every corner of the pillows for possible intruders.

As to Tamara, sometimes, when Leva hovered over her, she would all at once cry out as if in pain. "A colicky pain," would say Niania, but Lubashenka would sadly shake her head and look for a scratch or a blue spot on the tender skin of the baby.

When Tamara was but a few weeks old, a queen of gypsies called on her, bringing her a charm to wear on her chain, next to the little golden cross, and a handsomely engraved silver cup. "Never let her take off this charm, and give her a drink out of this cup every Sunday noon, and she will be well and happy and richer than the Tsar." She then took one of the baby's pink hands, turned its palm upward, and carefully studied the lines. She looked so concerned and was silent for so long that Natasha could not help asking uneasily, "Well, what do you see? Is it something very bad?" The gypsy paid no attention to her, but continued scrutinizing the faint lines.

And all of a sudden she tenderly put down the little hand, leaned back in her chair, and closed her eyes as if in a trance. She began to murmur, at first indistinctly, then louder and louder and so fast that her three listeners had a hard time following her: "Lucky child—lucky stars—

seven lucky stars.—Born at the moonrise—under a cloud—black cloud for three months—danger—big danger for three months—almost dies—quick, quick take her—she will die.—She is safe now.—And now she is losing a friend—two friends—long travel—new friends—a man doing woman's work—all black—the cloud is gone—the sun will shine for the rest of her life—take her from here—take her away.—The sun and the moon will meet in her life, but take her away—take her away.”

The woman almost screamed out the last words and ran out before either the frightened Olia or the equally frightened Lubashenka had thought of following her.

“Oh, why did you let her go, why did you? I wanted to ask her what she meant! Run, make someone bring her back!” commanded Countess Natalie.

But it took a long time to find someone to send in pursuit of her. By the time the messenger at last reached the gypsies' camp the gypsies were already gone, no one knew in what direction.

Countess Natalie became so excited and worried that they had to send for Father Boris, who prayed with her and chided her for believing

in witchcraft and prophecies of an ignorant gypsy. Calmed down by the prayer and the serene assurance of Father Boris that no evil could touch the baby without the will of God, and that mothers' prayers were never left unanswered, Natasha finally went to sleep, holding on tight to the baby, and the faithful Lubashenka watching over them.

But, try as she would, she could not get the strange prophecy out of her mind. Neither could Lubashenka and Olia. They all three constantly thought of it, and even discussed it among themselves, shamefacedly and yet more than half believing in it. Superstitions and faith in fortune-telling are rooted so deeply in most of us that education and knowledge struggle hard to combat them. Especially is this true when coincidence, as in this case, seems to confirm their predictions.

The events that occurred in rapid succession before Tamara was three months old seemed to bear out uncannily the prophecy of the old gypsy.

Captain Medvedeff was transferred to a regiment in Great Russia and had to leave at once. Lubashenka was, of course, going with him. "You understand, Natashenka, don't you, that

I have to go with my husband? What God has joined together—— And besides, his affliction, you know. I could never let him go alone.”

Of course, Natasha knew and understood perfectly well. But it was hard to part with such a friend, such a helper, such a comforter in the hour of stress. The Vassenbachs were to follow in a year—but a year without Lubashenka was going to be a long and lonesome year.

Niania was also to go with Lubashenka. She was aging rapidly, ailing constantly, and suffering terribly from homesickness. It seemed advisable to part with her for a year “rather than have her die on our hands and upset the children,” as Count Vassenbach put it somewhat bluntly.

The parting scene was as brief as possible and as cheerful as swollen, tear-stained faces and heavy hearts could make it. Lubashenka had left everything as comfortable and easy for her beloved Natasha as a pair of capable hands, a loving heart, and a thoughtful mind could make it.

She had engaged and trained a native woman to take care of Tamara, instructed Olia how to look after and amuse Nusha, and besought the

boys to be as little trouble as possible and help Mother whenever they could.

The nurse seemed well trained, Olia radiant in her new dignity, and the boys subdued and quiet. They were promised a pony apiece for good behavior, and were anxious to earn the reward. Countess Natalie had completely recovered from her illness and was full of energy and strength. She had read a good deal during her illness, mostly on bringing up children, and was eager to apply her new theories in practice.

But the serene and peaceful atmosphere did not last very long.

A few days after Lubashenka had left, Olia let Nusha eat a big piece of rich native sweetmeat which completely upset the child's delicate stomach and sent her to bed running a high fever. Olia, roundly scolded by both Father and Mother, sneered at by Leva, who had supplied the forbidden fruit, and teased by Misha for her "lack of brains," slunk, in disgrace, to her room, and also went to bed with a sick headache and gnawing pain in her heart because she had failed in her trust.

Though Nusha's recovery was as quick as could be expected, she was for days very weak

and demanded a good deal of attention. Most of the care of Tamara was left to the new nurse. Olia tried to help, but was rudely rebuffed by the nurse and none too gently reproved for interfering by her mother, who was anxious and exhausted by sleepless nights and strenuous duties to which she was not used. When Olia's worries for the beloved baby overcame her timidity and she started telling her mother what the new nurse was doing, Natalie, instead of listening to her as she would ordinarily have done, interrupted her irritably: "Run along, Olia, and mind your own business. You have done mischief enough as it is. Run along and play."

And so it was three or more days before Countess Natalie discovered that the baby was so quiet because the nurse was dosing her day and night with some native remedy containing opium. The doctor reached them just in time to save the child from an overdose. The Count came with him, and the nurse had to leave with more haste than ceremony. As she belonged in the neighboring village and had friends and relatives all over the neighborhood, her precipitated exit and her version of it spread very quickly, and no other woman would come to take her place. Natalie was almost glad to hear

it, because she felt that she could never again entrust her baby to an ignorant and deceitful native. She assured her husband that Tamara was no care at all, and that she was now strong enough to look after her own family, that, after all, it was her sacred duty to do so, that thousands of women did so, and there was no reason why she should not.

Count Vassenbach was very much disturbed and even angry that his wife should have become imbued with such advanced and unwomanly notions, and the doctor shook his head at the thought of how little Countess Natalie knew about the amount of work she was undertaking. But as long as there was no help to be had, they both had to submit to the inevitable and let Natasha have her own way.

For a month or so, the affairs of the household ran quite smoothly.

Olia and her mother took turns in looking after the baby and Nusha. Countess Natalie tried, as an experiment, to talk to Olia on the care of the babies and even let her read some extracts out of her books. The experiment proved very successful. For the first time in her life, Olia voluntarily exchanged her day-dreams and fairy tales for books dealing with

reality, with bathing and feeding and amusing a child. She patiently played with Nusha by the hour in order to keep her quiet and contented so that her "darling Tamara's" nap would not be interrupted by Nusha's screams of fright or shrieks of delight when amused by Misha. Misha was often willing to play with Nusha, but he was so strenuous and boisterous that both Natalie and Olia lived in constant anxiety that he would kill or maim her, or break her limbs. He would swing Nusha so high that Olia's heart would stand still and her head would swim—just to watch them, or else he would toss her up in the air or gallop up and down the stairs with the child perched precariously on his shoulder. An hour's playing with Misha would leave Nusha in such a state of excitement and exhilaration that it would take her hours to quiet down and go to sleep, and her sleep would be restless and interrupted by nightmares.

Leva's attempt at playing with Nusha invariably ended in a scrap and angry tears on both sides.

So Olia, the peace-lover, preferred to play with Nusha as much as she could and to leave her brothers free to do what they liked. Fortunately, the big estate full of animals, wild and

tame, combined with Misha's vivid imagination and Leva's ability to catch Misha's ideas on the fly and to help execute them, kept both boys busy and amused most of the time.

It worried Countess Natalia that Olia's and Misha's lessons had to suffer, and Count Vassenbach volunteered to tutor them. But the first lesson given by a quick-tempered father to an overtimid girl and an overexuberant boy proved so disastrous that Countess Natalie quickly suggested that it was vacation time in all schools, and so it would not be fair to keep children at lessons. No one disagreed with her, and the lessons were dropped, not to be resumed until a real tutor could be found.

And then came the day of a near-catastrophe which vividly brought back to Natalie's mind the prophecy of the gypsy queen.

CHAPTER XII

OLIA TO THE RESCUE



ALL that week things in the once unruffled household had been going from bad to worse, or so it seemed to poor Natalie, whose nerves were so overwrought that she broke her rule

never to complain, never to tell her husband about her domestic difficulties. "It seems to me," she began as soon as he came, scarcely giving him time to kiss her and to put down his military cap and to unbuckle his sword—"it seems to me that Misha gets more and more unruly every day, and I caught Leva telling me a lie. I wish you would talk to him. And Olia

worries me. She grows thinner and thinner and has headaches almost every day. And Father Boris is sick himself with a contagious fever and will not see any one. I am terribly worried about him, and yet I cannot even find a moment to go and see him. Could you manage to stay here Monday and give me a chance to drive over to see how he is?"

"So I am to be nurse?" said Count Vassenbach cuttingly. "A nice occupation for a colonel in the Imperial Army!"

Natalie flushed painfully at this so well-deserved rebuke.

"Forgive me, Kolinka, it was foolish of me even to suggest such a thing. Of course I did not expect you to take care of the children. Olia was going to do it. I just wanted you to be here in case anything should happen. But I see now in what an undignified position I was putting you. Please forgive me, darling!" And taking his hand she pressed it against her cheek. Count Vassenbach kissed her in return, but did not quite forgive her either her request or the shattering of his dream. He had had a hard week in town—insubordination among the natives, restiveness among the soldiers, heat and dust. He was doubly glad to leave the city and all its

cares behind and to ride out into the mountains. He had ridden very slowly, deeply breathing in the fresh air and dreaming of his pretty wife who would rush out to meet him and would make him forget that there ever were any troubles in life.

The sight of his wife, thin, worried, and even slightly dishevelled-looking, so in contrast to his dreams, and her tired complaining voice, annoyed him and he took no pains to conceal his disapproval of her and of the way she was bringing up their children. Misha was sharply reproved for forgetting to salute his father before he rushed to kiss him. Olia was sarcastically reminded that some fathers liked their daughters to be affectionate and greet them with a kiss, not a scowl. Nusha's request for candy was completely ignored, (he had forgotten to get any candy, but did not like to admit it,) and Leva was sent out of the room to wash his hands and brush his hair. So the announcement of lunch was hailed by all with a sigh of relief. But even lunch did not improve matters. The cook who sent in the roast browned more than appealed to the Count that day was sent for and told to report at the regiment and be put under arrest. He, the Count, would see to it that a

real cook instead of a farmhand should be detailed to his family. The two orderlies, waiting on the table, barely dared to breathe, and when one of them dropped a fork, they both turned as white as death. Fortunately, the incident passed unnoticed by the Count. Just then, Tamara, who slept on the roof of the *aoul*, woke up and began to cry.

Olia, who heard her first, jumped up. "Sit still," said Count Vassenbach sternly.

"But Tamara is crying."

"Let her cry—she will stop in a minute. No sense in humoring her all the time."

But the cries did not stop. On the contrary, they grew in strength and insistency.

Olia again half rose in her seat, "Mamma, hadn't I better go and see what is the matter?"

"Sit still, Olia. How many times must I speak to you? Have you not learned yet that you have to obey your father at once? Can you not sit still a minute? Always looking for excuses to jump up from the table! Cannot we have even one meal without commotion?"

The cries kept increasing in volume.

"May I, Mamma?"—an agonized pleading from Olia.

"Sit still, Olia darling, I will go myself."

"Natalie, I prefer you to sit still also."

"But, Kolinka, someone must go and see what is wrong. The child has never cried like that before."

The cries had become almost deafening.

The Count, who was by now sorry that he had given such a rash order, cast about for means of retreat without losing his dignity.

"Let Leva go and see what is wrong."

But Leva was also in one of his ugly moods. "I won't. I am not her nurse either," he answered sulkily, without moving. But a look from his father and warning kick from Misha sent him flying upstairs.

The cries ceased abruptly, and Leva came back three steps at a time and took his seat.

"What was the matter?"

"Nothing, Mamma. I guess she was just mad. But I've fixed her."

"How did you do it?"

"Oh, I've just fixed her."

But something in his answer made Olia suspicious, and she rushed to the baby without waiting for anybody's permission.

Her piercing shriek of terror brought every member of the family to the roof.

They found Olia, trembling and exhausted, tugging vainly at a heavy divan cushion wedged between the sides of the crib, on top of the baby.

Count Vassenbach threw out the cushion and lifted the baby, already turning blue from suffocation. But Olia snatched her away from him and gave her a slap on the back.

Tamara cried out again and her cry seemed to have broken the spell.

As always, when frightened or hurt, Count Vassenbach's first impulse was to fasten the blame on someone.

"Natalie, how could you have left such a big cushion anywhere where it could fall on the baby and endanger her life? Another five minutes and she would have been smothered to death."

"I put it near the crib to keep out the wind. I do not see how it could have possibly fallen on top of her."

"I pushed it there," announced Leva, now somewhat frightened but still proud of the efficient way in which he had fixed the baby. "I put it on her so that we could not hear her cry."

All Count Vassenbach's pent-up wrath of the week, augmented by so many annoyances at

home, was let loose on the culprit. "You—you—you——" He even began to stutter, as always when terribly angry. "You——"

But Countess Natalie put her hand on his shoulder and pressed it firmly until she made him look at her. "Kolinka," she repeated warningly, "do not forget the children. Look, look over there," and she pointed to where Olia stood trembling but radiant, her eyes overflowing, her arms tightly clasping Tamara, her twitching lips kissing Baby's face wet from mingled tears of both of them, paying not the least attention to Misha, who raged and stormed at her: "You bad, wicked girl, how dare you spank my Tiewk, my darling baby, how dare you hurt her when she was almost dead anyway?"

"I had to," answered Olia, evidently just to get rid of him.

"You had to? But, why—why, Olia? don't you love her any more?"

"Of course I do. Don't bother me, Misha."

But Misha was as persistent as ever: "I will bother you, too, until you tell me why you were so naughty."

Countess Vassenbach, who took in the situation at a glance, saw that it was time to interfere.

"Leave her alone, Misha," she said. "Olia

slapped the baby because we had read only yesterday that it was the best thing to do when Baby was choking or losing her breath. I am thankful that Olia had remembered it. Her quick action has probably saved Baby's life."

"Oh," exclaimed Misha, regarding Olia with new respect, almost with awe. "Good, old Olia, to think of it in time. I did not know that one could really learn something from the books. How did you think of it, Olia?"

"Oh, I just did," answered Olia indifferently, and turned to her mother: "Is she all right, Mamma?"

"Yes, she is, darling," said Natalie, taking the baby in her own arms and tenderly kissing her oldest daughter. "My dear, clever, brave Olia."

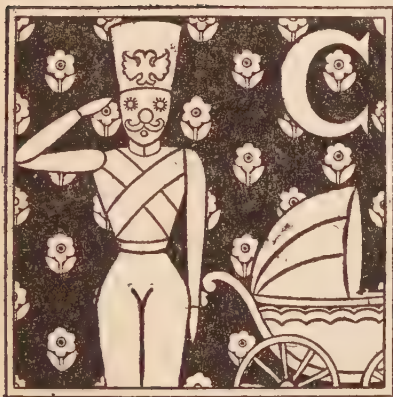
So for once Olia's dream came true. She was the center of the family circle, the praised, the petted member of it, the heroine, the pride of her father's heart. For once, she did not have to cringe under and slink away from the look of angry scorn in her father's eyes because, for once, she had risen to the occasion and acted with courage and presence of mind worthy of her great-great-great-grandmother Vassenbach von Vassenbach.

And yet, somehow, Olia felt no pride, no joy,

in those praises, only a surprise that so much fuss should be made about such a little thing, such a perfectly natural occurrence. What would be the use of trying to learn about taking care of babies if you did not apply it in practice? What concerned her most was how to guard Tamara from any such accidents in the future.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SOLDIER NURSE



COUNT VASSEN-BACH left for town next morning, vowing that he would not return without a good nurse. It took him a week, but when he did return he brought along not only a

nurse, but also a tutor for the boys.

Countess Natalie liked the tutor at once. He was a young officer, clean and wholesome looking, with merry eyes and a firm chin. His left arm had been badly maimed in a skirmish with a hostile tribe, which had incapacitated him for further military service. He had resigned, and was on the point of leaving the Caucasus when

Count Vassenbach had an inspiration to engage him as tutor.

Ivan Ivanovich Stolypin soon made friends with the boys and with Nusha, who promptly reduced his name, too long for her to pronounce correctly, into "Van-Vanich" and "Van-Vanich" he became to all of them.

"But where is the nurse?" asked Countess Natalie, vainly trying to discover the trustworthy, reliable nurse of which her husband had spoken to her.

"There *she* is," smilingly answered the Count, pointing at a very young, very light-haired, very embarrassed-looking soldier who stood there blushing painfully and trying to banish from his face a broad grin.

"You see," continued the Count, without giving his wife a chance to voice her protest, "it was impossible to find any woman to come out here, and this boy, his name is Koniava, was absolutely no good as a soldier. A woman's work is all he is good for. He cannot shoot straight and is afraid of the gun, but he can scrub, wash, and iron, and he spends all his free time taking care of somebody's babies. So one of my sergeants suggested detailing him to our household. See what he can do for you."

Countess Natalie's first impulse was to refuse flatly and indignantly even to try such a preposterous innovation. But the thought of all the unfinished housework which kept piling up in spite of long hours of ceaseless toil, also Koniava's evident eagerness to be accepted, prompted her to say: "All right, I will see what I can do with him. Go into the house, Koniava. I will come by and by and tell you what to do."

Koniava went into the house, but Countess Natalie did not see him again for many hours. Though she would not admit it even to herself, she dreaded this new task of showing Koniava around, of telling him what to do and how to do it. Domestic affairs were going badly but they had shaken themselves into some semblance of routine and order. Why disturb it all again? Natalie was very doubtful of the success of the new venture.

She had tried before to have soldiers do the woman's work, the cleaning and scrubbing. Every time, it had left her prostrated for days from the effort to plan their work for them, to watch that they did it right, and to offset the damage done through their clumsiness and stupidity.

Why, oh, why had Kolinka brought to her

this funny-looking boy, who, she was sure, would be more bother than help.

So, when Count Vassenbach asked her to drive out with him to a neighboring settlement, where he had to perform a very important mission and counted on his wife to help, she accepted eagerly.

It would be such a relief to postpone for a while tackling her new task. Olia and the new tutor, who looked reliable, had promised to look after the younger children, and when she came back—well, she would have to take herself in hand and see if Koniava was good for anything.

She returned some hours later, refreshed and rested by a pleasant drive and a long heart-to-heart talk with her husband, a talk not interrupted, as it had been of late, by constant demands on her time and attention by various members of a very much upset household.

In the meantime, Koniava had taken the situation very much into his own hands. Donning a big, all-enveloping apron, and banishing everyone into the garden, he had swiftly and thoroughly cleaned the house, going into every nook and corner, but carefully returning every

article to its accustomed place, or improving on the place where it had been kept.

He washed all the soiled linen and clothes on which he could lay his hands, and he ironed them with his own flatiron, a big, heavy iron, hollowed out on the top and with a little door at one end. Through that little door you filled the iron with hot charcoal, closed and fastened the door, and at once the iron grew hot enough to use. And the faster you ironed, the hotter it grew, until you had to stop ironing to let it cool off. Misha thought this a most wonderful invention, and so did Koniava. He had bought it out of the "vodka money"—2 kopeks a day, given to every soldier who did not drink the vodka passed to the soldiers at each meal. He confided to Misha, that he was now saving for a sewing machine which had just been invented. It could stitch twenty times as fast as one could do by hand. But it would take a long time to save up enough money to buy one; besides, he had just heard about it from some tailor who had heard about it from someone else, and did not know how much truth there was in such a rumor. But Koniava thought there would be no harm in beginning to save money at once.

When the Vassenbachs returned home at supper time, they found the main *aoul* radiating cleanliness and order. The dining room was cool and fragrant with the blossoms artistically arranged in the center of the table, the silver and glasses shining as they had not shone for months, the table linen spotless and snowy white.

Van-Vanich and the two boys were playing chess in the summerhouse, also swept clean and dusted. The tables and the settees there were scrubbed, under Koniava's supervision, by Misha and Leva, who had followed Koniava all the afternoon. Fascinated by the quickness with which he worked and by the "funny soldier songs" he sang while working, and eager to take part in this new game of housecleaning, they both had helped him as much as they could.

Under the big almond tree was another happy family group: Koniava, also scrubbed clean and all in white, was playing "peek-a-boo" with Nusha, who laughed and squealed with delight. [Tamara, bathed and dressed in the shortest, coolest dress Koniava could find, was half dozing, half watching a bunch of bright-colored streamers tied to a branch at just a right distance from her eyes. Olia, for once relieved from all responsibility, was engrossed in a shabby, evi-

dently much read book entitled, "The Twenty-seven Virtues of the Seven Wise Virgins," which Koniava had timidly offered her after she had confided to him that she knew all her books by heart and was longing for new ones.

After Natalie had inspected all the work done by Koniava in one short afternoon, and the intelligent, deft way in which it was done, she said: "Oh, Kolinka, no woman could have done it quicker and better, I am sure. How could you say that he was stupid! I am so glad that you have discovered him."

Thus, with a feeling of relief and confidence, Countess Vassenbach that day accepted Koniava as a major-domo, a nurse, and a housemaid.

Once more Natalie's life became what it should have always been—a life of ease and contentment, a life in which she presided graciously over a harmonious household, relieved of all petty cares, protected from all small annoyances, and with plenty of time to devote to the children and to her husband when he was with her.

It was fortunate, indeed, that these two new members, the tutor and the factotum, were added to the household at that time. Instead of a very few more months anticipated by the Vassenbachs, their stay in the mountains

was prolonged for three years. The unrest among the different tribes kept growing all the time stronger, and Count Vassenbach was the only man capable of handling the situation. His men liked him and he was very popular among the natives, who trusted him and often acted on his advice. But even his life was not safe. There was always danger from a stray bullet of some hostile native, or a stab in the back by some religious fanatic, who felt it to be his sacred duty to serve Allah by exterminating all the infidels. On the nights when the Count was expected at the *aoul*, his wife lived in agony until his safe arrival. She used to spend many an hour with her ear glued to the ground, listening for the sound of the horse's hoofs. By lying very close to the ground, and by listening very intently, she could hear faintly when someone was passing a bridge five miles away. The bridge once crossed, the Count was safe among friendly natives. Countess Natalie had learned to distinguish the sound of the hoofs of his pacer from that of any other horse. Once she knew that her husband had crossed the bridge, she became again happy and care-free, and so the Count never suspected her anxiety.

One day, however, Nadir dashed home rider-

less. Count Vassenbach, just after crossing the bridge, had dismounted to pick a rare flower which he spied on the bank. He absent-mindedly tied the reins together and threw them over the saddle, which in town was his signal to Nadir to trot home alone instead of waiting for his master.

When Natalie saw Nadir, she became panic stricken and completely lost her head. Without calling for help, without waiting for a carriage, she rushed out alone and on foot in search of her husband, whom she visualized as lying dead, pierced by a bullet or a knife. She ran panting and staggering but not slackening her speed until, in turning a sharp corner, she met him leisurely walking toward the *aoul*. When she saw him, alive and unharmed, she screamed, "Kolinka!" and fell at his feet in a dead faint.

CHAPTER XIV

MISHA'S ADVENTURE



IT WAS after that incident that Count Vassenbach wrote to his brother - in - law telling him to leave no stone unturned until he had secured their immediate return to Great Russia.

But before they left the mountains, Natasha had experienced another fright which, as she said, almost cost her her reason.

One early morning, Misha disappeared. They searched for him everywhere but could find no trace of him—just as if the earth had swallowed him. As the last resort, they sent in search of him his faithful shepherd dog. After the first few false clues, the dog, all at once, seemed to have become sure of the path

taken by his little master. He gave a joyous bark or two and, leaping from rock to rock, also disappeared from view and did not return.

One searching party after another returned discouraged, without having found either the boy or the dog.

On the third day, however, they both returned, both exhausted and scratched and bleeding, and both dirty almost beyond recognition, starved and thirsty. Even after Misha had been bathed, fed, and had slept the clock around, he refused to talk about his experiences and would not answer any questions. The only thing they could get out of him was, "I was not afraid of them and I told them so. But I gave my word of honor that I would not tell on them. So they did not kill me but left me in the cave and covered up the entrance. Then came Kos-sak and dug me out, and we ran away. That is all that I can tell you."

Neither persuasions nor even threats of punishment could move him. When his father tried to make him confide in him, Misha looked at him with his big, expressive eyes and said seriously, as a man arguing with a man, "Papa, don't you understand, that I have given my word of honor not to tell? Would you like me

to break my word? Would you do that if you were in my place?"

Half amused and half proud of his son, Count Vassenbach had to admit that the boy was right, and the matter was dropped as far as Misha was concerned. No one was allowed to ask him questions or to try to make him tell.

However, neither Father nor Mother could rest until the mystery was solved. Leva inadvertently gave them the first clue. He slept in the same room with Misha, and he complained to his mother that, ever since Misha came back, he had been talking much in his sleep, and jumping up and saying things so loudly that he, Leva, could not sleep.

"What is he talking about?"

"Oh, I don't know. Mostly he says: 'Go away, go away, I won't let you kill me. Soldiers don't kill children. I told you I won't tattle.' And sometimes he shouts, 'Kossak, Kossak, come here.' And, Mamma, he showed me once a beautiful watch, all gold and diamonds. He said he found it in the cave."

"Did he really show it to you?"

"Well, no, not exactly. He hid some things in the mattress of his bed, and after he was gone, I opened the mattress and saw the watch."

"Why, Leva, it was naughty to do that."

"But I wanted to know what he was hiding, and then he came and was awfully mad with me. I said I would tell on him, and he said he did not care, that he wished he could tell you all about it himself."

When Countess Natalie related this conversation to her husband, they both agreed that it looked as if Misha had stumbled on the two deserters who had left their regiment a week before and were terrorizing the country by their daring robberies. The state police, to whom Count Vassenbach had passed on the information, borrowed Misha's dog and, with his help, discovered a cave so well hidden among the rocks that no one ever suspected its existence.

Both fugitives were found there sound asleep amidst their loot and many empty winebags. They evidently had felt so secure in their hiding place that they had kept no watch.

Next day, Count Vassenbach took Misha to town. On the way, he asked him: "Misha, would you be afraid to meet two very bad robbers?"

Misha turned white. "Do I know them?"

"I am not sure, but I rather think that you do. Are you afraid?"

Misha thought for a moment, "I do not think that I am afraid, Papa, but if they see me, they will kill me; that is what one of them told me. They will think that I have tattled."

"They can do you no harm, Misha; they are in chains and heavily guarded."

In the court room, Misha was brought face to face with the two suspects. "Do you know those men?" asked the judge.

"I cannot tell."

"Why not?"

"I promised not to tell."

"To whom did you promise? To them?"

"Yes."

"Then you do know them?"

Misha stamped his foot in anger, "I think you are a very mean man, Mr. Judge, to try to catch me. I promised not to tell and I will not tell, so there."

Even the two criminals had to smile at his red, angry face.

"That's all right, little *Barin*, you can talk all you want to now. It is all up with us, anyway."

"Shut up, you fool," shouted the other one angrily. "I told you then that we'd better kill the brat so that he would not give us away."

"I didn't! I didn't!" reiterated Misha.

"I know you didn't, little *Barin*, but go ahead and tell them all about it now, or better yet, let me tell." And unexpectedly prostrating himself before the judge, the younger one of the deserters said: "Your gracious Honor, God's and Tsar's own faithful judge, my soul is seeking peace by confessing my sins. So hear me, all ye orthodox people, who are in this room. My *tavarishch*" (pointing at the other criminal), "and me were soldiers for twenty years, and we were looking forward to being released in five more years. But our sergeant, God curse his wicked soul, demanded a big bribe from all us soldiers in his troop, a big sum of money for a Christmas present. My *tavarishch* and me, we had no money and told him so, and so he got mad and, to get even, lied about us to the colonel, and swore that he was telling the truth. His high Honor, the colonel, believed the hound and gave us as punishment five more years to serve. So we said to each other, let us chuck the service and run away, before we die like dogs, here in a strange land, away from our families. And Senka" (pointing at his fellow deserter), "that is he, says to me, says he, 'all right Petka'—Petka—that is me. Says he, 'Let us run away and get some money from all those rich people

that live in the city.' We knew of the cave, and that no one else knew about it, and we hid there daytimes, and at night we picked locks and robbed people.

"It was as easy, your Honor, as cutting butter. I never knew how easy it would be for us to get away with the stuff," he added naïvely.

"But where did you get my boy?" asked Count Vassenbach impatiently.

"They did not get me. I got them," said Misha, "I was sick of sticking around the house all the time, and Van-Vanich would not take me anywhere. He said it was not safe to wander off far from home because of the uprisings. So I thought I would go all by myself when he was not looking. I never promised any one not to," he added, noticing and understanding his father's angry look, and then continued addressing the judge:

"I got up early and I walked and walked, and then I stumbled and fell into the bushes, and when I was getting up I saw an opening into a cave, all hidden by the bushes, and lying on the ground was a beautiful gold watch. So I thought that it must be Aladdin's cave and I better go inside. And there was some food there and goat's milk, and *curdukes* of wine, and I

thought it was for me, so I ate all I could and then went to sleep. In the night, two soldiers came in. I thought all soldiers were nice, so I came out to them, but they got terribly angry and swore awfully, and that one, Senka, wanted to kill me, but the other one, Petka, would not let him. He was awfully nice and winked at me and told me not to be afraid, only to swear that I would never tell on them. I gave my word of honor, and he was going to let me out, but the other one would not let me go, and put big rocks at the door when they went out so I could not get out. And when they came back, Senka again wanted to kill me, and they had a fight. But I was not afraid, because I knew that God would help me as soon as Mamma said her prayers to Him, and besides, I had prayed, too. One day, after they were gone, I heard Kossak bark, and I called him, and him and me, we dug away the stones and ran home. And that is all."

"Enough for one small boy, I should say," remarked the judge. "I hope it will teach you a lesson, young man, never to do it again, and not to worry your mother."

"No, of course, I will never do it again, but I am afraid I shall worry my mother again. You

see, I do some things and they are not naughty—at least, I do not think at the time that they are naughty. And then Mother worries and tells me that they were naughty, so I never can tell beforehand when I will be naughty and when she will worry. Well, good-bye, Mr. Judge, and you Senka and Petka, good-bye, too. I hope to see you soon again.”

Petka grinned at him and said, “God keep you safe, little *barchuk*.”

But the other prisoner scowled at Misha and mumbled something about getting him some day. His ugly, angry face frightened Misha, and for weeks after that he would dream of Senka “getting him,” and scream and call Kos-sak.

So when one day Father told him that the two prisoners had quarreled violently, and in the fight that followed had wounded each other so severely that they both died, Misha felt a great relief that his only enemy was now out of the way.

The joy and excitement of Misha’s miraculous escape from danger had not had time to quiet down when another joyful and exciting piece of news reached the family. A special courier arrived from St. Petersburg bringing to Count

Vassenbach the long-looked-for release from duty, and the order to leave for Russia at once, without waiting for the arrival of his successor. It did not take the excited family long to get ready. This time they were to travel light indeed, on mules, with only the most necessary articles, and under the protection of a large, heavily armed guard. Uprisings had almost been quelled, but the road was as yet not safe for carriages and heavy vans. Misha was given a short but frisky and sure-footed pony. Olia and even Countess Natalie had to ride astride. Countess Natalie had hanging on each side of her saddle two deep baskets in which sat Leva and Nusha. Koniava followed with Tamara securely strapped to a wicker cradle in front of him. The journey was very slow and tedious until they reached the nearest railroad station, the first one they had ever seen.

CHAPTER XV

THE FAMILY DIVIDES



HE Vassenbachs did not open their house in St. Petersburg, but stopped overnight at the hotel, and then went to Finland, where Count Smirensky was at the time governor of one of the provinces, and where his mother and sister were making their home with him.

The palace assigned to the executive head was very spacious, and there was room for three or more families. Count Vassenbach had to report on duty in a far-away town where his regiment was stationed at the time, so Prince Smirensky wanted Natasha and her children to stay with him for at least a year. But Natasha was very anxious not to be separated from her hus-

band and prepared to put up with many inconveniences.

"You do not know, George, how much our life in the Caucasus has changed me. Why, I have become very skillful and independent; I can not only dress myself without any maid, but even dress the children, take all the care of them, and mend their clothes."

"Yes, your roughened fingers show it," dryly remarked her sister, putting her own snow-white, manicured hand with long almond-shaped nails next to Natasha's sunburned ones.

"Oh, that comes from gardening," said Natasha, laughing. "The children and I love to dig in the garden."

"Natalie," exclaimed her horrified mother, reproachfully, "you have not turned into one of those radical women who scorn fashions, maintain that all people are born equal, are willing to do manual work, and say that there is no God?"

Natasha's laugh rang out gaily. "Oh, no, *Maman!* Of course not! Just imagine my thinking that Koniava and old Stepan were born Kolia's equals, or that you and Niania have the same kind of blood in you!"—and her laughter rang out again in merry peals. "But I believe,

just the same, that we should treat our inferiors with kindness and consideration. I always teach my children to say 'Thank you' and 'Please,' even to the servants."

"Oh, Natalie, you must not do that!" exclaimed at once both her mother and her sister. "You will spoil the *tcheliad* so that they will become of no use to us."

Countess Natalie did not argue the point, but she remembered some of the sayings of Father Boris about being kind to everyone, even to the beasts of burden, and she knew that she was right.

Countess Vassenbach soon began to realize that her views on many questions differed radically from those of her mother and brother, and especially her unmarried sister who, with the advancing years, became more and more arrogant in her snobbishness, less and less interested in church, religion, and any questions of general interest, outside of the sphere of her own pleasures and troubles. A disappointment in love—the sudden death of her fiancé—had embittered her to such an extent that to disagree with her meant almost invariably a family quarrel. So every one gave in and let her have her own way, and she tyrannized over the whole

household. Countess Vassenbach, herself spoiled by her husband and used to the deference and adoration of all around her, found it rather difficult to get along with her sister. So she considerably shortened her visit.

Both Princess Smirensky and Lena wanted to keep Olia with them. The quiet, docile child, pretty and well mannered, appealed to them. "Let us keep her, Sister," said Lena, "and I promise to mold her into a true-blue aristocrat and have her make a brilliant match. With those starry eyes of hers and the sweet smile, she will turn all men's heads. Just give us a chance to dress her properly and to teach her some little graces which she is now lacking."

Olia blushed scarlet under this praise and the promise of marriage. Was she old enough to think of love and marriage? She had read surreptitiously love novels in Aunt Lena's special bookcase, often left unlocked, and her heart had more than once beat queerly at the mysterious words "love," "marriage," "wedding." Was she really old enough to think of it all? What delight it would be to live in the house full of such books, to wear beautiful clothes, and to have as pretty white hands as Aunt Lena. But then, that would mean separa-

tion from Father and Mother and all with whom she had lived all her life. And at this sad thought, Olia's eyes filled with tears.

Countess Vassenbach was quick to notice both the blush and the tears, and to guess the reason.

"What, leave here our oldest child, our pride and joy, not to have her with us, not to watch her development? Why, Lena, you must have lost your senses! Why, how dare you ask a mother to consent to be separated from her child! I suppose it is because you never had a child of your own!" And to Olia, "Run away, dear, and do not think of it any more. Of course, we would not leave you here. Run along, darling!"

"Stop, Olia, do not go. I want you to tell me which you would rather do! Don't you want to stay with us? You are old enough to decide for yourself, if your mother does not know what is best for you. If you stay with us, I will give you the pink parasol which you have admired so much, and a new hat, and a pony and phaëton all to yourself."

Olia stopped, irresolute and dazzled with all those promises, but her mother took her by the shoulders and almost pushed her out of the

room: "Run along, darling, go into the nursery and stay there until I call you."

Olia left, bewildered and somewhat disappointed. Of course, she did not want to stay here, but why not let her choose? She was not a baby and would not be treated like one. But what would be her decision? Did she want to stay, or go with the family? And if she went, her aunt would be angry; if she decided to stay, her father and mother would feel hurt. Oh, why was life so complicated? After all, it was lucky that she did not have to decide.

This thought comforted Olia, and she went back to the nursery quite contented to accept without a murmur whatever decision was going to be made by her elders.

But the strife which she left behind her went on with an ever-increasing force. Countess Natalie came back into the room with her mouth set, her fists clenched, and her face pale with the effort to remain calm and not to forget that she was to bear this trial with a meekness becoming to a true Christian. But though her tongue was still, there was not much meekness in her big, expressive eyes, flashing fires of indignation.

At first, Princess Lena tried kindness, flattery,

persuasion, but when all that failed, she began to shower on her sister bitter reproaches and accusations, not caring much whether they were true or not. The whim to keep Olia with them had come to her suddenly, and at first she did not care much whether or not her request would be granted. In fact, the minute the suggestion was made, she began to regret it, thinking of many drawbacks and responsibilities which Olia's staying with them would bring in its wake. But her sister's curt and indignant refusal had angered her so that she at once began to wish it ardently and feel that her sister was cruel and ungrateful in not granting her request. Her sister's silence in answer to all her reproaches—the "cruel, superior, obstinate silence" as she now termed it—she construed as another deliberate insult to her, and was lashed by it into a blind fury which, as always when her will was crossed, ended in a fit of hysteria out of which she came spent, exhausted, and a shivering object of pity even to those who, like her sister, knew that it was all brought on by her own temper and lack of self-control. It was at those moments that every one usually ended by giving in to her, so she was quite amazed to see that Natasha, though crying and apologizing for

having excited her so, still persisted in her refusal to leave Olia with her. "Lena, Lenotschka," she kept repeating, covering her sister's hand and face with tearful kisses, "forgive me, darling, for having brought it on you, forgive me, little soul, I would do anything to atone for it. But don't ask me to leave Olia here—it would not be right. She is a tender plant and very sensitive. She is easily influenced, and her will power needs constant strengthening. You will kill it in her completely; you would love and spoil her, but you would be all the time killing her soul."

At that Princess Lena, who was just beginning to recover because she thought that the victory was near, gave a piercing shriek and fainted away. But even that did not change Countess Vassenbach's decision.

"You are cruel, Natashenka, you are as hard as stone, in spite of all your kindness," said her mother, pleading her oldest daughter's cause. "You see how it affects Lena, and yet you find it in you to refuse."

"Mother, darling, little Mother, don't you see that I refuse because God put Olia in my charge and made it clear to me what is best for her."

"God forgive you, Natalie, for your pride in thinking that you are better fitted to bring up a child than your mother and your older sister."

It hurt Natalie terribly to see the tears in her mother's eyes, and to notice how her hand trembled and how old and sad she looked.

Finally, a compromise was reached—Olia was to go with her parents, but little Tamara, then a little over four years old, was to be left behind. Countess Vassenbach's heart almost broke at the thought of parting, and she never would have consented to it if she had not had a dream that night through which she thought God was trying to show her that it was His will to have it so.

Count Vassenbach was very much displeased and even angry with her about it, but she was as firm in this decision as she was in the first one, and asked her husband not to be blasphemous when he exclaimed that it was very convenient to have God siding with what we wanted to do and forbidding us what we did not want to do.

And that was how it happened that little Tamara was separated from her family for five long years and brought up almost a stranger to them.

CHAPTER XVI

TAMARA'S WINTER IN FINLAND



COUNTRESS VASSEN-
SEN BACH
planned to leave
Tamara for only
a year or two and
to see a good deal
of her during that
time, but Count
Vassenbach was
sent to a far-off
place in southern

Russia, his family spending part of the time with him and part in the country on the family estate—both places too far removed from Finland to make frequent journeys possible; the family cares, supervision of the estates which fell on the shoulders of Countess Natalie, then the arrival and death of another little girl, absorbed her so that she never could find it possible to be away from home for sev-

eral weeks. Tamara was well, happy, and apparently brought up in a right way, and so Countess Natalie, trusting to the watchful eye of God, postponed the journey from month to month.

From the first, Princess Lena planned to devote all her time to taking care of her little niece, but one or two sleepless nights, one or two crying spells on the part of the baby, were enough to make her hastily engage a nurse and then cast her eye about for someone who would be capable of taking the whole charge of Tamara. She was very fortunate to come across an English noblewoman who was looking for a position as a governess where she would be given full authority to carry out her rather advanced ideas on bringing up children. She stipulated that she would not have any one interfere with the routine which she was going to introduce, and also that she would need the services of a nurse and a chambermaid to carry out her instructions. She was so highly recommended and Princess Smirensky was so anxious to be relieved of her duties, that Lady Harrisford was engaged and all her conditions accepted.

Lady Harrisford had been left a widow at thirty, both her husband and two little boys

having been killed in an accident. The estates went over to the side branch of the family. The head of it, Sir John Harrisford, was famous for his cruelty, injustice, and skill in acquiring wealth by fair and foul means. He cleverly defrauded Lady Mary even of the small dowager's estate which rightly belonged to her, and forced her out of the house almost penniless. Rather than go to law and expose herself to undesirable publicity, Lady Harrisford decided to leave England and earn her own living. She had taken her motherhood very seriously, and had prepared herself by systematic studies and reading to be a worthy guide of her children. When all her hopes were so cruelly frustrated, she was determined not to bury her talent, but to use it on some other child who needed a mother's love and care. Misfortunes had not embittered her. Her heart was yearning for someone on whom she could lavish her love.

Lena Smirensky hesitated a long time before engaging this great lady as governess. She did not like her beauty, her poise, her assurance without arrogance, her soft voice, and the unwavering, positive views, none the less forceful because they were expressed in a voice of a melodious cadence and in faultless French.

She felt dwarfed, insignificant, commonplace in the presence of this quiet, dignified, and self-possessed great lady with a sad mouth and sparkling, humorous eyes.

Her dislike was aggravated by the ease with which Lady Mary won over the shy little Tamara.

The mean, nagging voice of jealousy and envy almost persuaded her not to engage this "peculiar person." But good reliable governesses were hard to find. This one was personally recommended by one of the Grand Duchesses. Besides, it would be distinctly pleasant to be able to mention casually that a real English peeress was in one's employ.

So Lady Harrisford was installed as a reigning power in the "nursery" quarters, where a young German nurse and a stolid, middle-aged Finnish chambermaid were helping destiny to make Tamara's life rich in happiness and health. She was brought up in a rather Spartan way, accustomed to ice-cold baths, to sleeping with open windows—an unheard-of thing in Russia—and to spending most of the day out of doors. Before Tamara was quite seven years old, she could swim, ride horseback and drive her phaëton with two ponies almost as well as

Lady Harrisford herself. She also had to learn to sew, knit, and embroider, and to devote at least three hours every day to lessons. So the days were full both for the teacher and the pupil, and Tamara never could find a minute to play with the many wax and porcelain dolls presented to her by her grandmother and aunt.

"Don't you like your nice dollies?" would ask Princess Smirensky.

"No, Grandma."

"Why not, child? I've never heard of a little girl not liking dolls."

"They break so. You cannot throw them around. I'd much rather play ball, or *cerceau* or tag with Nero and Fidèle."

"You should not play with dogs," sternly remarked Princess Lena. "It is not ladylike. I must speak to your governess about it." Tamara did not argue, she had learned long ago that arguing with Aunt Lena made the latter very cross, and the cross Aunt Lena was not pleasant to have about. One could argue with almost everybody else, ask them reasons why a thing should or should not be done, and at times even get clear and satisfactory replies. "Lammy"—her childish abbreviation for Lady Mary—always explained things to her, even unasked. But

with Aunt Lena it was wiser to say "*Oui, ma tante,*" or "*Non, ma tante,*" and leave her as soon as politeness permitted.

At first, Princess Lena tried to remonstrate with the "crazy ways" of bringing up a child, or heedlessly to upset the routine of the child's day, to drag her into the parlor, show her off to visitors, and overfeed her with sweets and pastry. But every time she found herself ignominiously retreating before the quiet determination of the hated "hireling." Once she had allowed herself to go into hysterics in the nursery, and had terribly frightened the child. Lady Harrisford had had a consultation with Prince Smirensky whose word was a law, even to the willful Princess Lena. After that, all interferences had ceased and a truce was declared. Tamara was to spend half an hour every morning with her grandmother, whom the lively child tired even in that short period. As Princess Lena never woke up before noon, and was out a good deal making calls or shopping, Tamara rarely saw her at all, except once a week, on the day "at home," when Princess Lena and her mother both insisted that Tamara should be brought in to be admired by the guests. Lady Mary did

not object. She felt that her influence was strong enough to counteract the thoughtless praises and flatteries of some empty-headed women, and it was very good discipline for the naturally shy child to have to meet so many people at once. "Real ladies hold up their heads and say 'How do you do,' and answer politely when spoken to. You want to be a real lady, don't you?"—" 'f coss I do"—and up would go the head and the little hand would bravely come out of its hiding place and slip into a much, much bigger one of some illustrious man or a gushing woman. It had finally become such a habit that, even in after years, a toss of the head and an inward " 'f coss I do" helped Tamara to meet bravely many a crisis.

When she was about eight, the happy monotony of her life was upset. Tamara was jolted out of a pleasant rut into a new and very unexpected mode of living.

A severe epidemic of scarlet fever and diphtheria visited the city, snatching away rich and poor alike. Princess Lena was among the first ones to catch it. Princess Smirensky, her son, and many of the servants were also ill.

Lady Harrisford, for the first time in her life,

became panicky. How could she best shield her darling from the terrible danger? Mina Himmelkul, the chambermaid, suggested going over to her home, out on the lake where no one was ever sick. Lady Harrisford packed Tamara's little traveling trunk—her Christmas present to Tamara a year before—and sent her off with Mina. She herself was staying behind to take care of the frail Princess Smirensky and her daughter. "Remember all my instructions, Mina, I have written them all out for you in Finnish." "Oh, ya-ya," answered the stolid Mina, who had no intentions of following any instructions. She did not need any. She had been in the house a week longer than "Fruherinna" herself, and knew by heart all that there was to know. But as to following all the instructions, that was a different matter. She had her own ideas about bringing up children. Let them play all day, let them eat all they want, and do not bother their heads with books and lessons until they are much older than this little tot. As to hiring a house and living there alone with a child—what nonsense! Did not her mother have a nice clean cottage in which there were, besides the old woman herself, her widowed brother with three children, an orphan

from a "home" (it was their turn to keep him that year), a little motherless calf, two lambkins, a couple of kittens, a dog, and two rare, precious white chickens? There surely would be room for two more souls, one of them not bigger than a young frog. Besides, she, Mina, had lived out for more than seven years, and she would be a fool to miss a chance to stay for a while with her own people, with her mother who baked on the straw such wonderful cardamom rings, and smoked such wonderful mackerel which just melted in your mouth.

Thus Tamara was taken right into the family, tumbling on the floor with kittens and chickens and the woolly lambkins, sharing the big double bed with three other youngsters as hearty and healthy as she. She skated on the lake on the crude home-made skates, slid down the hills on a piece of old leather, and entered full-heartedly into all the family occupations, troubles, and joys. But her education was not neglected either. Mrs. Himmekul did not approve of the flippant way in which her daughter had disregarded all the instructions given to her. "Hast thou forgotten, Mina, in that wicked city of thy heart's desire, that thou hast to be faithful to those who pay thee? Thinkest thou that God

will look with favor upon thy disobedience? Shame upon thee, Mina, shame! Where are the instructions given to thee? Bring them to thy old mother and she will see to it that the child does what her gracious lady governess wanted her to do." Mina had to dive 'way down to the bottom of her trunk to fish out the book of instructions, fifteen pages of directions written out in a flowery hand and in a flowery language by a native scribe to whom Lady Mary had entrusted the translation into Finnish.

After having pored and pondered over the manuscript, Mrs. Himmekul divided in her mind all the directions into three groups: those which it would not be possible to carry out, those which could be attempted but not with much hope for success, and those which could and should be carried out implicitly. For instance it was out of the question to try to open at this time of the year a furnished house which was for rent and which Mina had at first suggested to Lady Harrisford. Therefore, Tamara must remain where she was, right in the family. It was not possible with the scarcity of water, help, and time to keep her in white dresses and to give her a bath every morning. She would be much better off in a warm native

costume and with a bath once a fortnight in the community bathhouse.

Tamara was of the same opinion. She was delighted with her short, full, homespun woolen skirt, dark blue with yellow and red stripes woven into it, with her bodice laced in front, a white woolen blouse with large, puffy sleeves, thick home-knitted woolen stockings, little red cap tied under her chin with dark blue strings, heavy shoes made by the best and only cobbler in the village. If her skin, not used to so much coarse wool, was irritated at first, Tamara had no time to think of it in the daytime, and at night Fru Himmekul always rubbed home-made potato starch all over her perspiring little body, and it felt so cool and comfortable that the "dream-man" was never kept waiting outside in the cold, and could stay with Tamara all night long, painting dream pictures for her.

And every other Saturday the big village bathhouse would be heated and filled with steam, and at dusk all the women and all the little girls and all the very littlest boys would undress at home, each take his own piece of soap, and run into the bathhouse just as fast as their legs would carry them. They would stay there, splashing and screaming and scrub-

bing each other with soapy bunches of pine or birch boughs, until everyone was soaped and scrubbed clean and rinsed out, first in the hot and then in the cold water, and glowed all over. When everyone was ready, the leader would open the door and they would all scramble home, running so fast that their feet barely touched the snow, and they did not have time to feel the cold. They would dress at home in a hot kitchen, laughing and chattering and scalding their throats with hot "toddlies." On the alternating Saturdays, men and boys would do the same, and women and girls in their turn would keep out of the way, with their backs toward the windows facing the street.

Cooking special meals for Tamara was also impossible and not practical. And if dried and salted fish, coarse black bread, and plenty of milk and potatoes kept the other members of the family well, why should they harm Tamara? And they did not. Not even the rye hard-tack baked in the fall in quantities enough to last all winter, strung through a hole in the middle on a strong hemp rope, and hung under the eaves. They were so hard that you had to crack them with a hatchet and soak them for a long time in cold water before you could eat them.

But Tamara loved them much better than the toast and fancy bread that she used to get at her grandmother's.

Writing letters home every week and brushing teeth three times a day was possible, but of no particular importance, and could be left to the discretion of the child herself. But there was one subject on which Mrs. Himmekul agreed implicitly with Lady Harrisford. Tamara should not be allowed to forget the four foreign languages which she now spoke so fluently. Children forget quickly, and every effort should be made to give her practice in those languages. Mrs. Himmekul, though herself not capable of learning even the simplest words in any foreign language, had the greatest admiration for any one who could speak more than his mother tongue alone. It seemed remarkable to her that her husband, who had served a good many years in the Russian Army, was able to speak Russian fluently. It was still more remarkable that Mina spoke, not only Russian, but also Swedish, the language of educated people in Finland. But to have a child, a little child, speak five languages and easily pass from one to the other without confusing them was almost incredible. It would be a crime to allow her to forget any

of them. So Mrs. Himmekul began to scheme and plot how to keep the child in practice. She finally decided that her husband and Mina should speak to Tamara in Russian and Swedish and that every day she would ask Tamara to give her names of different subjects in German, French, and English. Even though she could not judge whether the child spoke correctly or not, it would help Tamara to keep in practice until something better would turn up. As Tamara was born under the lucky star, something better did turn up very quickly, in the shape of a Russian exile who was compelled to live in this small village.

About that time, the liberal tendency of the Russian Government had suffered a great setback, and the "unreliables" or "political suspects" were severely punished and exiled, those found guilty to Siberia or to the prisons in distant towns. Those who were only suspected were sent to non-Russian-speaking parts of Russia, to the villages where they could do the least harm, preferably to Polish and Finnish or Esthonian villages where they could not be understood by the natives, and therefore could not contaminate them with their too liberal ideas. Andrey Pavloff, a young professor

in one of the smaller universities, was exiled to Finland for three years for blasphemy and disrespect to the Tsar, for views too liberal to be tolerated. All because he jokingly remarked that as long as Russia and the Russians were under the special protection of Father God and Little Father Tsar both fathers could have made a better job of it.

He took his exile very good-naturedly, surrounded himself with books, worked on the thesis for his doctor's degree, took long walks, studied Finnish, and easily made friends with the villagers, and especially with the children. He agreed to tutor Tamara for two hours a day in Russian, German, and French, and to help her a little with English, which he knew only slightly. So every morning at nine o'clock, after the housework was all done, Tamara had to bring out her books, and for two hours every day Tamara and her teacher worked over the lessons which Lady Harrisford sent them regularly every week and which were sent back to her for correction. Mrs. Himmekul invariably joined them with her big ball of yarn and her knitting, and sat there entranced, listening by the hour to the queer-sounding words which she did not understand, but which she enjoyed the

more because she did not have to try to get the meaning of them.

On Sunday, everyone in the family went to the small community hall, where Mr. Himmelkul, who was the elder of the church, conducted the simple but impressive service. After the service Mr. Himmelkul instructed the children in reading, writing, and simple arithmetic, and gave out lessons for the following week, because it was an off year for the village, and the district schoolmaster was not due until early in May. So between the work and the play, Tamara's life, along with the life of all the villagers, ran a smooth and even course. Only the four weeks around Christmas-time were crowded full of excitement, three big events all at once: Christmas with its mysteries and festivities, the unexpected arrival of the traveling minister, and the stopping over in their village of the felt-boot-maker.

CHAPTER XVII

CHRISTMAS EXCITEMENT



REPARATIONS

for Christmas began with the first of Advent. Mrs. Himmekul thoroughly cleaned her always immaculate house, cooked, sewed, knitted, and embroidered every spare moment, also

baked some queer-looking, delicious smelling cookies, which disappeared into the padlocked milk room before the children had a chance to get a good look at them. Mr. Himmekul indulged in his favorite occupations, whittling and whistling, without being reproved for messing up the room and wasting "God's time." All the children, including Tamara, were given bright pieces of cloth, needles and thread, and

ten big pennies apiece to spend on presents. "Because you must have a *yul-clapp* for everyone in the family," explained Mina to Tamara. "And then you do them up in as funny a way as you can and put them into the big hamper which stands in the woodshed. By and by, the *yul-bock* will come and take them to the Christ-Child to be blessed and then bring them back to us. And all the time while you are making your *yul-clapps*, you must be very good and not quarrel, and think the very best thoughts, about God, and heaven, and the Bible verses and hymns. Presents made with good and happy thoughts would make Jesus Christ smile, and those made in angry or jealous spirit would make Him cry. And who would want to make little Child Jesus shed tears on His birthday?"

There were many consultations between the children and the resourceful Mina. Tamara, specially, needed a good deal of expert advice and guidance. Her ten shiny pennies seemed inexhaustible to her. She was going to buy a new Bible for "Aunt Himmekul," a diamond stick-pin for "Uncle Himmekul," a pony apiece for each of the children, and a gold bracelet for Mina. But she was finally persuaded that Mrs. Himmekul loved her old Bible, would never

use any other, and that a ribbon bookmark with a cross and a red rose embroidered on it would just suit her, and that a clay pipe for Mr. Himmekul and a stick of barley sugar apiece for the children were all that her purse permitted. Mina also hinted very broadly that a certain short poem copied by her darling on a sheet of pretty blue paper, sold for half a penny, would be very much appreciated by Mina.

The Christmas Eve dawned upon the village bright and smiling. The air was frosty and so still that one's breath froze up immediately and came back to one in the shape of tiny sparkling snow-stars. Men's beards and moustaches were covered with long icicles, and women and girls had to cover up their mouths and noses so as not to freeze them. Everybody's ears were covered up, anyway. But the cold had not kept any one at home, except the very, very old and the very, very young. It was a large and merry crowd which gathered in front of the community house with hatchets and sleds, ready to "pave the way for the Christ-Child."

The paving of the way consisted of cutting piles and piles of fragrant pine boughs and taking them to the top of the highest hill over which the Star of Bethlehem was to shine that night.

A small carpet made of the most perfect branches, tied with gay strips of calico, was laid there "for the angels to rest their feet on," and from there a footpath was tramped down all the way to the center of the village, and from there to the front door of each house. Every two steps a green branch would be dropped on the path, which, of course, took a good many branches, and still there were enough left to decorate the community house, all the doorways on the outside, and enough for each housewife to spread all over her dining table, under the coarse, homespun tablecloth with stars and crosses of dull blue woven into it. Even the poorest households could boast of one of those tablecloths, relics of the days when weaving was a home art and the unbleached linen so strong and so well taken care of that it could serve generation after generation and still be as good as new.

At dusk the table was spread with Christmas Eve delicacies: thinly sliced salted salmon, smoked meats, cardamon rings, cookies in the shape of stars, *lud-fisk*—dried codfish steamed until tender and served whole, and, best of all, a big bowlful of rice boiled with raisins and chopped nuts. Somewhere in that rice was one

whole almond. The member of the family who found it in his serving would marry first or, if too young or already married, would have the best luck all the year.

As soon as the Star appeared on the horizon, the village fire bell rang out the joyous tidings, and in every window was put a lighted tallow candle to greet the new-born babe. On the dining table were lighted six more, one apiece for Joseph and Mary, and four for the angels, the wise men, the shepherds, and for all the Christians. In every house, the members gathered around the table, and the oldest woman in the family read the Christmas story as told by Saint Matthew. Then they all sang in Finnish (Tamara, too, because she had been practising for the last month, with the family, and at prayer meetings, and alone with Mina). "Holy Night, Silent Night"—every verse of it—and it sounded so sweet and gay and yet sad that tears sprang to Tamara's eyes, and she could barely finish the last line and was ready to break down because she was so glad that Christ was born, and so sorry that she had to be away from her own home . . . and so . . . so . . . But just then Aunt Himmekul said briskly and smiling right into Tamara's eyes,

"Well, happy Christmas to you all, and many, many of them, and now let us eat our dinner." She did not have to invite any one twice, and all the nice Christmas dishes disappeared in a twinkling of an eye. Maybe even a bit quicker, because they all, especially the children, were very eager to clear the table and make room for the *yul-clapps*.

After they had sung "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear" and "The Little Town of Bethlehem," Mr. Himmekul said that he thought he heard the yule goat bleating at the door. And immediately all the children thought that they heard him, too. So Mr. Himmekul got up and went to open the door for him. Tamara wanted to go, too, but they all told her that the goat would not have any one but the master of the house. So she kept her seat, her eyes glued on the kitchen door, left slightly ajar. In a minute or two the back door was slammed hard, and there was a big noise in the woodshed and tramping of heavy feet, and a thin piping voice, sounding more like the bleating of a goat was heard to ask, "Are there any Christian souls living here?" And Mr. Himmekul answered: "Yes, the Himmekuls live here."—"Any children? Are they good?"—"Yes, oh, yes, they

are very good." A sigh of relief from the children, who were afraid that some of their little misdemeanors would be related to the *yul-bock*. "Well, let me see for myself"; and the door swung open and closed again, revealing for a second something big and furry and horny. If to some of the "grown-ups" it did look like a sheepskin coat turned inside out, with sticks thrust into the sleeves, the children, at any rate, saw plainly a shaggy goat with enormously long horns.

"All right. I guess they are good. Let me give them some presents"; and in was pushed the big hamper filled to overflowing with the queerest-looking objects. When Mr. Himmekul came in, his hair all rumpled, he and his wife started the distribution of presents, throwing them at the respective recipients. The old lady Himmekul, dainty and fine as a piece of Dresden china, who had come to visit her son, received amidst the general laughter a worn-out man's boot bearing the inscription: "To Mamma Himmekul. She is wearing the pants in the family, so give her also the boots." But when, undaunted, she thrust her hand deep into it, up to the farthest corner of the toe part, she pulled out a soft fluffy, gray mitten, the mate to

which came later in a big, hollowed-out turnip with the top put on back so securely and the line around the opening smeared so skillfully with dirt that even the sharp eyes of the children were slow to detect it. Tamara had to unwind and wind up again a big ball of yarn before she came to a pretty sewing box, carved for her by Mr. Himmekul. The big rag doll dressed in a national costume, true to life in every detail, beautifully made, so that the doll could be dressed and undressed, was wrapped up first in paper and then in a big bunch of hay, to which was attached a tag with the inscription, "A supper for my darling ewe-lamb from Mina. Do not eat all the hay at once."

The little orphan boy received a burlap bag containing six dirty withered potatoes, one or two carrots, a red beet, and a shingle on which was printed, "Oscar, you have helped to raise them, they are yours." Tamara was indignant at such a measly gift, but Oscar knew better. He turned and twisted each vegetable until he was satisfied that each one was hollow. In each one of them was a slip telling Oscar where to look for the gifts, some in the attic, some behind the wood pile, some in the baking oven. And when all collected, they made a goodly

show—a whole new outfit, including a sheep-skin coat, a pair of mittens, a warm cap, and, best of all, a pocketknife, the dream of his life.

After the presents had been distributed and admired and exclaimed over, and the funny or clever way in which they were done up discussed and laughed over, and the givers thanked over and over again, they all went back to their seats, their presents piled in front and all around them. Grandma Himmekul read another verse, Papa Himmekul said a short prayer, another hymn was sung, and the children were tucked into bed, happy but sleepy, the rest of the family following soon after, and only the star and the moon and the invisible angels remained to keep watch over the sleepy, happy village. In the middle of the night, Tamara woke up. She thought she heard the angels singing. She tried to see the Star of Bethlehem, but could see only the big, bright, silvery moon smiling at her through the passing cloud. Somehow, it made Tamara think of her "Lammy" and her father and mother, whom she did not at all remember except that Father was very, very tall, and tossed her up in the air, and that Mother was very soft and smelt so good, and that something hot and salty trickled right into

Tamara's mouth as her mother kissed her and whispered: "Don't forget me, Tamara, love me always, always."

No, she would never forget. And Tamara slid to the floor, knelt in front of the ikon hanging at the head of her part of the bed, folded her hands and whispered passionately, intensely, too intensely for such a young child: "Oh, dear God, please make me remember my mother before I forget her and let me see her very soon, and tell her that I love her, dear God, little Child Jesus, Amen." And shivering, she jumped back into bed, excited, her heart beating fast, she did not know why, the warmth of the bed and the presence of God enveloping her, and the hope to see her mother growing into an assurance.'

CHAPTER XVIII

TAMARA AND THE OLD FELT-BEATER



T THE prayer meeting next day, Mr. Himmekul gave out notice that word was sent to him through his mother that the traveling preacher would be with them in a week from Sunday and

would stay four days. With him were coming the felt-beater and his little boy. They would stay as long as the work lasted.

Now, both pieces of news were very pleasant and very exciting, but it was too bad that the two events had to collide. The community house would, of course, have to be turned over to the preacher. He would be busy every min-

ute, what with the weddings and the christenings, and the funeral services over the graves of the departed ones, and the communion services and the confirmation of young people.

The preacher had not been in the village for three years, and in the meantime many had died, many had been born and names given to them without any service, many had become man and wife, and they were all eager to get the ratification and the blessing of the Church. The felt-beater would have to wait until the preacher had departed. So much was evident, but it meant, of course, boarding him at the expense of the community without getting any work from him in return.

After a good deal of excited talk and arguments, three selectmen were appointed to formulate the plans, make out the list of all that had to be done, arrange for boarding out the three guests, and collect the money and produce to be paid to the preacher for his services.

It was left to the women-folk to see to it that enough candles and a generous spread were provided every evening in the community house, where all would gather to listen to the preacher's stories about what was going on in the world. No newspapers were, of course, avail-

able, and the events a year or two old and long forgotten by the rest of the world would be news in this, as in many other out-of-the-way villages.

Even by marrying people five or six couples at a time, and by christening them in groups according to age, and by conducting two communion services a day, it took the preacher six days instead of four to "clean up" the village. Six days of excitement, six evenings of story-telling, singing, and feasting on apples, nuts, and home-made dainties! No lessons for Tamara, and no going to bed early! And after the preacher had left, his capacious sleigh filled to overflowing with donations, his frisky little horse groomed and overfed by the eager parishioners, prancing and jingling the bells on the harness, the felt-beater came into his own. The whole village turned out in the big community hall to watch and to help spread out the big screen frame, and to attach it to the wall at just the right angle. It took several hours to assort all the bundles of wool, to straighten out the orders, and to take measurements. That done, men and women dispersed, one by one, to their respective homes, but children too young to be needed in the household were allowed and even urged to stay, the littlest ones to be out of the

way, the older ones to save the felt-beater many steps and to keep track of the bundles of wool. Their sharp eyes would notice in a minute any mistake. And mistakes were easy to make, even with so many watchers. The old Hansen had almost used some of the Karen's wool in the boots intended for Oswald Longren. Only the outcry of twenty shrill voices had stayed his hand just as he was ready to untie the wrong wool.

The big wooden mallet was beating the damp wool on the frame so fast that Olaf, the twelve-year-old apprentice, could not feed it speedily enough, and so some of the smartest children were allowed to assist him. The nimble-fingered, quick-witted Tamara soon became the old man's favorite. Because she was cautious and alert, he even allowed her to twist and pull the woolly mat and to sprinkle it while the mallet was up in the air. Tamara soon caught the rhythm of it—up goes the mallet, in comes the sprinkler, down comes the mallet, out goes the sprinkler. Up goes the mallet, in comes the scratcher*, down comes the mallet, out goes the scratcher.

Tamara became perfectly fascinated with the

* A long stick with five or six wire hooks.

new game, and was helping old Hansen much more than the slow-moving, slow-thinking, unmusical Olaf, whose sprinkler and scratcher constantly collided with the mallet. Old Hansen said that with Tamara's help, he could turn out twice as much work as with Olaf's help. Flattered and genuinely interested, Tamara became indefatigable and completely usurped Olaf's place. She even contemplated going on with old Hansen after the work here was done. Olaf could stay with the Himmekuls. Olaf did not care. He was heartily sick of his job and enjoyed the unexpected leisure and the opportunity to doze all day in the corner, chewing a tobacco wad which he had picked up on the street. (Even among the thrifty Finns you can occasionally run across one who would be so extravagant as to spit out his tobacco before all the strength had gone out of it.) It was Olaf's first opportunity for chewing tobacco, and he was more than twelve years old. That came, of course, from being an orphan without a penny of spending money. The well-to-do boys often had their first wad of tobacco here before they were seven.

As a token of his appreciation, old Hansen decorated Tamara's new felt boots with three

rows of stitching in bright red, blue, and yellow, colors of Finland. He also half promised Tamara to call for her on the way back, if she were still in the village. This half promise was the only thing that kept Tamara from making another attempt to run away with the old felt-beater. Her first attempt was frustrated by cruel fate. She had hidden herself in the sleigh which was to take Olaf and Hansen to the nearest village. But just before starting, Mr. Himmekul noticed the bulky object under the blanket and poked it rather hard to find out what was in it. Old Hansen's honesty was, of course, above suspicion, but Olaf was only a boy, and an orphan. . . . The kick almost dislocated Tamara's shoulder; she groaned and was discovered.

After so much excitement and festivity, it was rather hard for old and young to settle down to the dull routine of the village life in winter. For two Sunday nights, "the social gatherings" were kept up and the recent events talked over and over again. But the third Sunday was too stormy to go out, and the blizzard did not subside for a whole week. Tamara, bored to death with dolls and knitting, tried to run out on the

street, but the wind and the snow blinded her and took her breath away as soon as she opened the door a tiny crack. She was glad to escape back to the warmth of the big kitchen stove.

Blizzards and storms continued all through February and March and nice, bright days were exceptions rather than a rule. The snow was so deep that it came to the upper panes of the windows, and for weeks the only light in the Himmekul house was contributed by smoking, ill-smelling tallow candles. One had to go to bed early and stay there twelve hours out of twenty-four. The air inside became stale and heavy, and the only way of getting in the fresh air was by the means of two tiny windows cut under the roof, and by leaving open the kitchen door which led into the passage connecting the house with the barn and the stable. The passage was built lightly and was full of cracks, but even these cracks were now packed in tight by the snow, and very little air penetrated through them. Every one began to feel sick and nauseated. Therefore, great was the joy when some of the neighbors whose doors were facing south, away from the wind and thus free from snow-drifts, came to the rescue, dug out a passage all

along the street, and shoveled away and scraped off the snow from the doors of their less fortunate neighbors.

Spring came that year early and with a rush, almost overnight. Though around the last of April, masses of slowly melting snow still covered the fields, and the hills and the shady places in the woods were still icebound, the air was soft and balmy all through the day, the buds on the trees were swollen and ready to burst open, and the snow flowers and anemones were bravely peeping out. The joy of spring seemed to have gone to Tamara's head. Barefooted, bare-headed, her hair flying and her cheeks and eyes glowing with the excitement and fun of it all, she spent most of her time outdoors, sometimes playing with other children, but mostly alone or with her teacher, who was as fond of romping and tramping as she, and who could tell her such wonderful stories about everything that met their eyes—plants and birds and animals, and even cold, unpromising-looking stones. Why, there was more to know about a plain gray little pebble than Tamara could remember in a day!

When, in May, the old, severe and strict district schoolmaster at last appeared to stay a

month, and kept her playmates at their books from eight till eight o'clock, Tamara barely noticed their absence. With the help of "Uncle Andrey", she was building a dam, collecting specimens of stones and flowers, and composing verses to spring. Yes, she was writing verses. She liked best the one that she wrote on a bright sunny day, after a long, long tramp:

"Oh, the spring is nice and lovely
And my feet are aching too
And my dam is almost finished
Woods are green, the sky is blue
And I love them all and Mina
And the rest of Himmekuls
And there are so many flowers
And I know they love me all,
And my 'Lammy' will come soon,
And we had some fish this noon,
I am very, very happy!"

CHAPTER XIX

WHERE MOTHER WAS A LITTLE GIRL



AT THE Vassenbachs', in the meantime, the course of family life again ran far from smoothly. For years, they were moving from place to place, following Count Vassen-

bach, whose brigade had been transferred three times, each time most unexpectedly, and every time to a station situated in a more distant and a more lonely, less civilized province, mostly on the border lines, among foreign-speaking, hostile tribes. Count Vassenbach's ability to get along with the natives and his knack of bringing order out of the chaos without terrorizing the population were recognized at court, and honor

after honor was showered upon him, but at the same time, he was considered too outspoken, too broad-minded, indeed, even too radical to be tolerated at court.

Count Vassenbach took both the honors and the underlying distrust at their value, and became more and more embittered at the ingratitude and stupidity of those who held in their hands the welfare of millions. Because he was called radical, he began to think himself radical. He read the works of Voltaire, Rousseau, and other revolutionary authors, which were not allowed to be circulated in Russia, but which, owing to his rank and title, he could get directly from foreign publishers, without submitting them to the censorship committee. He had read most of those books, understood some of them, and assimilated their spirit sufficiently to be able to talk on the subject fluently and convincingly.

Equality, freedom of speech, respect for individuality, equal rights for all, women included, had become his favorite themes of discussion, both in the family circle and outside of it. And yet it had never occurred to him to apply his theories in practice in his everyday life. He became more and more quick-tem-

pered, irritable, exacting, and intolerant, and even tyrannical. Olia, Leva, and Nusha were afraid of him and avoided him as much as possible. Misha defied him and often won out. The men in his brigade idolized him for his bravery, generosity, and the privileges he allowed them, but his servants trembled before him, deceived him, and took advantage of his moods of repentance, which always followed his outbursts of temper.

The family life was alternately gay, happy, and unrestrained "when Papa was away," and subdued, uncertain, charged with apprehension "when Papa was at home."

Count Vassenbach's prolonged trips of inspection were welcomed by all; even by Countess Natalie, though she adored her husband and felt lonely and unprotected without him.

Her husband's radicalism, lack of faith, and his ungovernable temper worried her greatly and she spent many hours in prayers for the divine help. To strengthen her petitions to God and his saints, she burned before the ikons many, many pounds of wax tapers.

Lack of educational opportunities for the children and their many faults and limitations also troubled her.

Olia was thin, pale, constantly suffering from headaches, provokingly oversensitive, and very nervous. Misha was perfectly well and strong, big-hearted, fearless, and truthful. But he was obstinate, unruly, too boisterous, and too adventuresome. Besides, he was a terrible tease, and was constantly playing pranks on his brother and sisters. Leva was always ailing, always sulky and secretive, and showed many other undesirable traits of character. Nusha was also delicate and rather backward.

Countess Natalie constantly missed little Tamara's bright smile and winning ways. She was sure that Tamara would never have squabbled, or ailed, or whined, or disobeyed her the way her other children did. She said it so often that everyone began to believe it, and Tamara was fast becoming a legendary figure, a "perfect" child.

"Go away, Olia," Misha would exclaim impatiently. "You are so clumsy and stupid! I wish Tiewk were here! She would know how to hold a kite without letting it slip out of her hand"; or, "Misha, you mean, hateful thing, you tore up my new book for your hateful kite," would wail Leva, "I wish Tamara were here, she would never be so mean."—"I wish Tamara

were here to play with me," would chime in Nusha. "Misha teases me so, and Leva is a crosspatch and pinches me all the time!"

Olia was the only one who seldom spoke of Tamara. But she thought of her constantly; when she thought of the little Tamara who used to cuddle up to her and call her "diddy-titty" (darling sister), she yearned for her and longed to hold her in her arms. But there were times when she envied and almost hated Tamara, whom everyone else praised and idealized and wished back.

The quick-tempered, impulsive, irresponsible Misha was the hardest one to manage and the greatest disturber of the jerky wheels of family life. So, although it was a surprise and a shock at first, it was also a decided relief to everyone when he received Imperial summons to report at the Navy Academy in accordance with the Grand Duke's promise made so long before.

Van-Vanich took Misha to St. Petersburg and returned with glowing accounts of the excellent marks which Misha had received in all his examinations, and of the good impression he had made on every one, instructors and pupils alike. "Mark my words," he said in conclu-

sion, "mark my words—that boy has a brilliant career before him."

Natalia Lvovna, who began to miss Misha and to worry about him the minute she had kissed him good-bye, asked Van-Vanich innumerable questions about him and his new surroundings, her voice trembling with suppressed tears. Olia, on the contrary, sat there silently, her eyes shining, drinking in every word of Van-Vanich.

"How she loves Misha," thought Countess Vassenbach, who had to spend many hours after Misha's departure, trying to calm and comfort Olia, who sobbed herself into constant headaches and could neither eat nor sleep. Everyone admired Olia's devotion to her brother, and no one had guessed, she least of all, that she was missing, not so much Misha, as Van-Vanich, and was crying so bitterly because there was a possibility of his not coming back to them. Count Vassenbach, who had not enjoyed the thought of Misha being all alone among strangers, tried to secure for Van-Vanich a position on the faculty of the Navy Academy. But another instructor, with a stronger influence, was appointed and Van-Vanich came back again,

ready to resume his duties as tutor to Olia and Leva.

Olia's headaches were gone as if by magic. She eagerly inspected the supply of new books brought by Van-Vanich, textbooks, historical novels, several volumes of poetry. She could already hear, in her imagination, his soft, well-modulated voice, rising and falling in rhythm with the verse:

"Like an eagle chained to a cruel rock,
I yearn for the freedom of azure skies,
I beat my wings and I curse my luck,
And thy name I whisper, beloved, and sigh."

After the birth and death of another little girl, Countess Vassenbach broke down both physically and nervously and was advised by her physician to take a complete and prolonged rest. She wanted to go to Finland to visit her mother, but the doctor thought the journey too long and too fatiguing and the climate too vigorous in her present weakened condition. A trip to a watering place in southern France was advocated, but Countess Vassenbach would not go abroad without her husband and her chil-

dren, and their going was out of the question at the time.

It was again Lubashenka who came to the rescue and suggested a plan acceptable to all.

At that time, Captain Medvedeff's regiment was stationed near Kamenka, the Vassenbachs' largest estate, about two hundred versts from Moscow.

The house had been closed for years, but was completely furnished and kept in repairs. Lubashenka volunteered to open the house, put it into running order, and stay with the Vassenbachs for at least a year, relieving Countess Natalie from all the care of the children and all the responsibilities about the house.

In less than two weeks, the house was ready to receive the family—all but the Count, whose duties prevented him from escorting his wife even part of the way.

The journey was supposed to be taken by very easy stages in order not to tire the patient, but the Countess was eager to reach the place where she was born and spent most of her childhood, and to which she still referred as "home." It had been in her father's family for generations, and was left to her and not to her brother, because the latter did not care for the life in

the country, while Natalie loved it, and once, when she was not more than five years old, asked her father please to give her Kamenka "to keep for ever and ever as her very own."

In her impatience to reach her destination as soon as possible, Natalie ordered the courier in charge of the party to make the daily laps much longer and the rest periods much briefer and at rarer intervals than had been planned by her husband and the physician.

A messenger was dispatched to advise Lubashenka of the much earlier date of their arrival. Olia was at first apprehensive for her mother's health, but she soon noticed that the excitement of the travel and the happy anticipations acted on her mother like tonic. Countess Vassenbach felt stronger and happier every day, also more and more eager and impatient to show to her children the old nest, as Leva had christened it.

"Oh, Olinka," she would say again and again, "I do hope that we will reach Kamenka at day-time! I cannot wait to show you the house and the garden and the birch grove. You will just love it!"

"I know I will, Mother," replied Olia, catching her mother's excitement and enthusiasm.

"I want to get there at daytime, too," said Leva. "I want to size up the place as soon as we get there."

"I do, too," chimed in Nusha, who always agreed with the last speaker.

So the courier was urged on and on to make haste. However, fate and the elements seemed to ally against the travelers toward the end of the journey. Everything went wrong on that last lap of only a few miles. One horse picked up a stone and was lamed, the other one developed the heaves and had to be put out of the misery. Leva cut a finger badly with a rusty knife, and the wound had to be washed out and bandaged, necessitating unpacking and repacking of several bags in search of the first-aid kit. And last of all, a thunderstorm and a heavy downpour sent the party scurrying for shelter into a near-by barn.

So the sun was very near the horizon when Countess Natalie exclaimed, "Look, look, children, see that bright spot to the right—that is the cupola of the house. We are only three versts from home. Hurry, Ephim, hurry!"

"Hurry, Ephim, hurry," echoed the children, in their eagerness twisting around, fidgeting, and jumping up and down in their seats.

"Children, do keep still, will you? You are trampling all over our feet. And thou, Ephim, please do hurry, or I will die of impatience." And Olia, white and trembling, pressed both hands to her heart, which was fluttering like a caged bird.

At the house, in the meantime, the excitement ran just as high, and the impatience was even harder to bear, as no one could foretell the exact time of the arrival of the family and everyone volunteered a guess. Lubashenka thought they would be in by ten, her husband did not expect them before noon, the priest suggested three o'clock as a likely hour, and the sub-deacon's wife, always pessimistic, did not expect them a minute before midnight.

However, it seemed wise to be on the safe side, and so the household was awakened before sunrise and the guests began to arrive soon after.

All the work had been finished the day before. Even the garlands of evergreen were hung over all the windows and doors, and the big wreath of welcome, head-gardener's masterpiece, was securely nailed over the entrance. Words, "Glad to see you," made out of stiff straw flowers, dyed bright red, stood out distinctly, even though at a somewhat rakish angle, "as if drunk

with joy," said one of the guests, a small official who was a recognized local wit.

By nine o'clock, the number of guests of honor invited to welcome the family was completed; by eleven, the samovar had been refilled and reheated five times and zakuska and vodka for the men and sweet cordials for the women had been passed around as many times. By twelve, there was not a soul who would partake of more tea, not even the deacon. When urged to accept his seventeenth glass, he turned the glass bottom up, put the spoon on it and topped the structure with a small piece of sugar left over, wiped his face with the wide sleeve of his flowing robe and very painstakingly explained that when he drank too much tea he began to sweat too hard. (Tea, like all the meals in summer, weather permitting, was served on the lawn, in the shade of the big trees.)

By noon, a hearty lunch was served to the guests, the best of everything kept hot for the travelers. By two o'clock, lunch finished and even the cordials put away, and no sign of travelers visible, the guests were easily persuaded to "recline in the arms of Morpheus." The more important guests were conducted to the numerous guest chambers; the lesser dignitaries,

like sub-deacon, some petty officials, and small landowners with big families were installed in two barns, men in one, women in the other, on the thick layers of hay covered with coarse, homespun linen sheets.

At first, the guests protested that they could not go to sleep on such a day, but Lubashenka knew better, and kept urging them on and the deacon upheld her by booming in his deepest bass that no one should go against God's will, and it was His Holy Will that creatures should take a nap after the noonday meal. "Just a short snooze," piped in his wife. "Just a minute or two," added the priest, with one hand caressing his long, wavy beard and with the other trying to cover up a deep yawn. "Cross your mouth, Father," advised somebody, "or the Evil One will sneak into you."

The afternoon siesta was neither light nor short—nor very silent, either. More than once flocks of sparrows and starlings, busy on the lawn with crumbs and bits of food, dropped by the careless guests, flew up in clouds, startled by a particularly loud and lusty outburst of snoring emanating from both barns.

By five o'clock, still yawning and stretching after their nap, the guests were again partaking

of a meal when a heavy shower drenched them without warning and ruined the dinner. Loud peals of thunder, screams, curses, and shrieks of hysterical laughter of the guests, and the aimless running back and forth of the servants, frightened by lightning, created such a confusion that the shower was almost over before some of the guests reached shelter. The storm had lasted but a few minutes, but damages to repair were great.

Most of the guests looked so disheveled, clothes being drenched, and crimps gone out of the hair of the clergy and women, and the starch gone out of the men's collars and shirts, that there was nothing left but to go home and change or postpone paying their respects to the new arrivals until the following day.

So it was, after all, only Lubashenka and her husband and the servants who greeted the Vassenbachs at the foot of the broad newly painted front steps.

It was just as well. Countess Natalie was very tired. It was only by exerting strong will power that she was able to go through the ordeal of meeting the most important members of the household, the steward, the cook, the housekeeper, and so on, about twenty in all, giv-

ing every one her hand to kiss and saying a few gracious words to each. Olia and Lena followed her example, and even Nusha did not jerk her hand away, and kept back her tears while dozens of bearded men and wrinkled women surrounded her and discussed her as if she were deaf and blind.

“Look at her, look at her, faithful Christians, look at her! Ain’t she handsome! Just like a painted doll! And look at them ruffles—and look at them curls! Look, Verka, look, she ain’t hiding her head in her mother’s skirt like you are doing, you rube! Look, she ain’t frightened a bit! Look, brothers, look, Christians, she is smiling like an angel—let me kiss again your darling hand. . . .”

More and more kisses, numberless kisses were showered on the hands, feet, shoulders, and even on the hem of the dress of poor Nusha, who stood there embarrassed and not knowing how to break through the ring of admirers which was closing on her. Lubashenka saw her plight, sent the excited crowd away, and took Nusha to the Countess Natalie’s boudoir, where the tea was to be served.

While Olia and Van-Vanich were tucking in Natalia Lvovna on a chaise-longue and bring-

ing her smelling salts, eau de cologne, and a glass of sugared rose water, the door was opened carefully, and three very young girls in starched petticoats, starched bright-colored percale dresses, and starched white aprons came in to "lay the tea." Their flaxen hair was parted in the middle and plastered down with linseed oil, their faces were shining from vigorous scrubbing with soap and water. They were bare-footed, all three of them.

"Why, Mamma!" exclaimed the horrified Nusha, "they forgot to put on their stockings and shoes."

Leva giggled, the maids flushed scarlet and hid their faces in their aprons.

"Hush, Nusha," said Olia, quick to sense their shyness, "it is not polite to make personal remarks. Besides. everyone does it in the country."

"Will I, too?"

"You are not a servant."

"I want to."

"I will, anyhow," announced Leva.

"I want to, too," whined Nusha.

"All right, Nusha, if Mamma will let you," promised Van-Vanich.

After tea and a short rest, Countess Natalie

insisted on taking the children all through the house and to the birch grove. "Here is where I used to play house. See, the stones are still there. See, those funny little round stones—they were my children. And this big one was my husband, and here is the fat butler like the old Mikita whom we had for so long." Quite excited, she sat among the scattered pebbles, lifting them almost tenderly, and telling the children incidents out of her childhood, gay and sad ones, and even some naughty pranks like hiding from the governess in the thick lilac bushes and making everyone think that she had run away.

Flushed with excitement, her eyes glowing softly, her hair, touched by the rays of the sun, glistening like gold, she appeared so beautiful, so young, that her children looked at her in awe. Was that really their mother? Why was she looking so young? Why was she not tired or sick as she had been of late? Was she really going to get well in the country, as the doctor said she would?

Even Leva felt the change in her, and nestled closer to her. He was glad to see her like that. He himself often felt tired and cross, not knowing why, just like Mother did lately.

Yes, he did hope that the country would help her.

Olia sat on the other side, and lifting her mother's hand, kissed it reverently.

"Well, Olinka, what is the matter?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Then why this grave look? Anything troubling you?"

"Oh, no, no, Mamotchka, nothing troubles me, indeed, indeed. I was just wondering—trying to imagine you as a little girl—and now you have us—and I was wondering——"

"Yes, Olia? What were you wondering about?"

"I was—I did—I thought—I was wondering if I would ever be like you, grown up and married and—and—have children, and know how to bring them up—and how to keep house—and what to say to people—and be as lovely as you are."

Natasha was deeply touched. She pressed Olia's hand understandingly and answered, "Of course you will, Olia! That is, if it should be the will of God. I hope He will send you a good husband and children to love."

Olia flushed even deeper and stammered, "I would never know what to do with them."

"Yes, you will, Olinka. God has given us an instinct which tells us what to do when the time comes. Besides, you had some experience with Tamara—oh, my darling, darling Tamara! how terribly I miss her!"

A wave of homesickness for Tamara swept also over Olia. "Oh, Mamotchka, Mamotchka, when is she coming home?"

"God only knows, Daughter. It is all in His Holy Hands."

"Let's not think of it to-night," exclaimed Leva, who hated to see sad faces or to think sad thoughts. "Let's go home. It is getting dark. There comes Lubashenka!" and Leva, glad to escape from a "sentimental talk," ran to meet Lubashenka and to relieve her of extra wraps and shawls.

But Olia and her mother both rather enjoyed this strain of sadness in their talk; they enjoyed squeezing each other's hands and looking into each other's tear-stained eyes—it seemed to have brought them closer together.

"You are so sympathetic, so understanding, Olinka!"

"It is because I love you so, Mamotchka, and I feel for you till my heart hurts."

An hour later, the moon shyly peered into the

house and found everyone asleep, except Olia, who sat on the window sill, looking like a very, very little girl in her plain cambric nightgown reaching to the ground and her lace-edged nightcap. But her thoughts were not the thoughts of a little girl. The cocoon was bursting open, and the butterfly ready to emerge into the moonlit, lilac-smelling world, where a nightingale, his brownish-gray head lifted, his throat swelling and throbbing, his eyes closed in ecstasy, was singing to his mate of love, of home, of children, of noble deeds, of lasting happiness.

"My home, my own home, not a rented house—the home of my ancestors—the holy ground—the garden—the moon—the trees hundreds of years old—and peasants—our devoted peasants—they look to us for help and guidance. . . . O, my God, O Holy Virgin—help me to be worthy of my ancestors," whispered Olia, "and, oh, dear God, please, please send me a good, loving husband and six children—and let my husband look like—like—like—— No, no, God, I did not mean to say that. I am a bold, wicked girl. . . ."

And, frightened at her own temerity, Olia hurriedly crossed herself, jumped into bed, and buried her face in the pillows.

It was often said about the Medvedeffs that, while Ivan Petrovitch was a captain in charge of a company, his wife was at least a full general and ought to have been in charge of the whole army. Very likely she would have proved herself equal to that task. She had certainly shown very remarkable executive ability in straightening out the tangles of the Vassenbachs' daily life.

Countess Natalie was relieved of all duties; she was not even allowed to give the children French lessons and talk French to them. "Talk Russian to them, my little dove," was Lubashenka's advice. "Their shortcomings and mistakes in French annoy you. Leave them alone, and by and by, in the fall, we will get a French governess who will teach them to jabber like magpies. Let them be free this summer, let them run wild and do as they please. They will thrive and grow strong on it. Count Nicholas is a fine man, but he treats his children as if they were his subordinates, soldiers who had no right to call their souls their own."

Countess Natalie saw the truth of this statement but she did not want to surrender without argument. "I am afraid such freedom would be too much for children. Would it not be

wiser to have Van-Vanich keep on with the lessons? I am afraid he will feel *de trop* without any definite duties."

"There will be no *detroppes* about him," flatly contradicted Lubashenka, "I can assure you that he will be busier and more needed than ever. I want him to keep his eye on the estate. I distrust the steward and want him watched. Captain Medvedeff will take Van-Vanich around the place and will show him how to check up on the steward. That will keep him busy all right."

"And it will also be a good change for him," agreed Natalie. "He looks pale and thin and in need of vigorous exercise."

So Van-Vanich, who heartily approved of Lubashenka's views and plans, put on his oldest boots and clothes and spent most of the time in the fields, in the woods, in the stables, and on the farm, riding or walking, always puffing at his short-stemmed pipe, talking little, asking very few questions, seemingly not much concerned about the way the estate was run, and yet acquiring a vast amount of information.

Olia missed her lessons in literature, but even she was glad to be absolutely free, to be allowed to spend days just as she liked and not according

to a tediously definite and strictly enforced routine. With the new régime one could get up at sunrise, if one wanted, or stay in bed until noon, having the morning coffee and rolls brought into one's room. One could come and go as one pleased, be late to meals, stay up late, take walks, or ride in the carriage or stay indoors without being reminded that it was time to do thus and so. As Lubashenka so wisely foresaw, the children did not abuse their freedom. Even when they happened to stray far from home, hunger and habit soon brought them back.

"Home so soon, Olia" (or Nusha or Leva, as the case might be)? "I thought you were going off for all day."

"Yes, Lubashenka, I was, but I thought it was dinner time," or, "I came back to see if Mamotchka wanted anything. Is she all right?"

Lubashenka would assure them that Countess Natalie was feeling well but sleeping or resting or reading and should not be disturbed, would fill their pockets with cookies and sandwiches, and cannily suggest some possible means of entertaining themselves. Olia was never at loss what to do. Her days were filled with reading to herself and aloud to her mother, with writing endless sentimental letters to Misha and to one

or two girl friends left behind and, mostly, with daydreaming and building castles in the air. She loved to follow Lubashenka into the linen room, filled with snowy white, sweetly smelling piles of homespun linen or imported damask. As washing was done only every three months, the supply of household linen had to be very large. In fact, as the head laundress once remarked, there was enough of everything to have laundry done but once every year. It was too bad, she confided to her associates, that little Mother, darling Countess Natalie Lvovna, God save her soul, got somehow a notion that it was not healthy to keep soiled linen unwashed for longer than a few months.

"Some dirty foreigner must have told her that."

"Yes, must have because we, holy Russian Christians, know that the rich and the nobles should have enough linen to keep them going for a year or two without bothering to wash the used linen."

"Sure, it must have been some dirty German who told her that, some *sheramiga* who had nothing to boast of but what was on her back."

Soiled linen made Olia shiver. She never went into the room where it was sorted and kept

out of sight in numerous trunks padlocked and tabulated and labeled in bright colors so that the illiterate women could tell at a glance which trunks contained table, which bed, which personal linen.

It took several laundresses two whole days to assort and count the linen, and at least two weeks to wash, mangle, and iron it. Nusha and Leva soon discovered the favorite pastime of the house children. (Most of the servants were married and their families were allotted lodgings in the many wings of the servants' quarters.) While clothes were being counted, all children under ten were allowed to play hide-and-seek, or "who jumps highest," on the billowy piles of clothes, provided that they did not drag the linen from one pile into another. On mangling days, they would all scramble into the big boxes among the heavy stones, shrieking with delight as the box, vigorously pushed to and fro by two women at each end, would move rapidly over the rollers, smoothing out sheets and other flat pieces wound around them. Leva and Nusha could ride on the mangle for hours at a time, even though at first they felt stiff and bruised from the cramped position in which they had to sit, and from unexpected close con-

tact with rough stones when the box would suddenly jump and jolt over a too loosely wound roll. Olia thought such a pastime undignified for even the youngest members of the family, but was restrained from interfering by Lubashenka's reminder that they all could do as they pleased as long as they harmed no one. She made Olia blush guiltily by remarking that some might think it undignified for the daughter of the house to spend hours in the linen room putting crushed flower sachets among the clean clothes, or in the sewing room helping to hem or embroider or darn the fine embroidered and damask tablecloths. Olia realized that Lubashenka had somehow guessed her secret, that with every stitch she put into the linen went daydreams of a family of her own, of a wonderful "He" who would some day gallop in and snatch her away from the humdrum of gray existence, from petty worries and squabbles with her brothers and sisters to a wonderful kingdom full of flowers, joy, and babies; that they would be living happily forever after, never growing old or gray or irritable, taking care of wonderful children who would never be sick or cross or disobedient. (Children were playing an important part in all daydreams of Olia. She

felt that it was not quite delicate to think too much of a lover or a husband, but it was perfectly proper for her to think of the children that would somehow come to her.)

Nusha was so very different from Olia in that respect that she was never interested in any day-dreams, and very little in fairy tales. She liked matter-of-fact stories, she liked everyday life with its cares and even worries, with its responsibilities which the grown-up people had to shoulder, and she just watched at a safe distance. She never wandered very far away from home, seldom going beyond the gate of the park. Most always she could be found either in the garden making mud pies, building houses out of stones and sticks, or tagging after Lubashenka or other equally busy members of the household. She seemed to enjoy watching the life go by without her being interested enough to make the slightest effort to join the procession. That was one of the reasons why she always agreed with the last speaker. Arguing would have drawn her too much into the midst of life. Nusha's agreeing with everyone was a standing joke in the family, and often led to unexpected comical situations.

"Nusha," Leva would say jokingly, "don't

you think it would be nice not to have any dinner to-night?"

"Yes," Nusha would agree, "I think it would be nice."

And then Leva would go and tell the butler not to set any place for Nusha, as she was not going to eat any dinner. Nusha, who loved her food and was always hungry, would fly into a fit of rage, calling Leva names and threatening to complain about him. But she never carried out her threat, because it would have been too much trouble to go to someone in authority, to state her case and to argue with Leva, who would always get the best of her.

Or else Leva would make her agree with him that fishes could live in the nests on the trees, or that she had seen green hares in the river, and afterward would be telling everyone how stupid Nusha was and what silly lies she told.

School hours were the hardest time for Nusha, because she was rather backward, slow to understand and to learn, eager to be helped, and still very trusting, in spite of many tricks which Leva was in a habit of playing on her. She would invariably fall into his trap and afterward would feel painfully mortified at her mistakes.

"Where is Africa?" Van-Vanich would ask.

"In Europe," Leva would whisper, as if talking to himself.

"In Europe," Nusha would repeat, without stopping to think, and then, at a surprised look from Van-Vanich and a snicker from Leva, she would realize her mistake, blush, stammer, and burst into tears. Leva seemed to find as morbid a delight in teasing his sister as he found in torturing small animals. But he was so clever at it that Van-Vanich, though often suspicious, could seldom prove his guilt and had to let him go unpunished. So, when lessons were suspended, Nusha was careful to avoid Leva as much as she could and to spend most of her time with Lubashenka. She craved no adventures and sought no dangers. Leva was not seeking danger either but his whole being craved thrills, adventures, secrets, conspiracy. When a big adventure at last came into his life, he gave himself up to it whole-heartedly, and for a time forgot to be grouchy, cross, and sulky.

CHAPTER XX

LEVA AND MITKA, THE PEASANT BOY



IT HAPPENED one early morning late in June. Just as he was leaning over the railing of the porch trying to hit with his ball a big snail who had for years lived undisturbed under the corner-

stone of the house, he heard someone calling, "*Barchuk, barchuk*, come here. I have something for you."

Leva dropped his ball, jumped over the railing, and cautiously approached the overgrown bushes from which the voice seemed to come. The bushes were parted by two rough, tanned hands, and a freckled, friendly, smiling face peered out between them.

"Look, *barchuk*, what I've brought thee." [The stranger dove into his once bright red shirt, now faded and torn in many places, and produced a crudely carved whistle.

"What's that for? What shall I do with it?" said Leva dubiously.

"Say, where do you come from? Haven't you ever called the birds?" And taking the whistle, the boy blew it softly, three high notes and a low one. A linnet answered the call. [Then a chirping sparrow, a robin, a finch, another finch, and yet another called back to him, and in a few minutes the garden was alive with whistling, warbling, chirping sounds.

Leva stood fascinated. "I never knew there were so many birds in the garden."

"Oh, that is nothing. You ought to hear them in the woods."

"Will you take me there?"

"Sure, any time."

"What is your name?"

"I am Mitka the fiercest."

"The what?"

"The fiercest," and with the most engaging, best-natured grin, Mitka proceeded to explain.

"There are three of us Mitkies in the village

—Mitka, the lazy, cross-eyed Mitka, and me, fiercest Mitka. That is because I am fierce at everything—working, eating, singing, learning.

“I used to go to school, but the teacher says their ain’t nothing no more for me to learn. I am minding the village herd this summer.”

“Where?”

“Come along, I will show you. My brother is minding them for me to-day. Your nurse-man told me to come here and get you.”

“What nurse-man?”

“The one that folks say used to mind you kids.”

“Oh, you mean Koniava. He is our butler now. Did he tell you to come?”

“Yes; he said for me to get to be your pal, because you are given to lying, and I never darsn’t tell a lie. A gypsy woman put a curse on my name before I was born, and told Mother that the first lie I told would choke me. So I darsn’t tell a lie—see?”

Leva saw and was glad that the gypsy’s curse was not on him. He found lies very convenient at times, and never hesitated to use them. So that was why Koniava had sent the boy? The cheek of them both! Leva flared up into one

of his sudden fits of rage: "You dirty *moujik*, how dare you think that you can be my pal! Get out of here!"

Mitka calmly picked up the whistle which Leva threw on the ground, spat on it, rubbed it with the tattered edge of his shirt sleeve, polished it on his short bulging trousers made out of two flour bags, and started to leave.

"Well, *barchuk*, good-bye. I am not dying to chum with you. I have all the chums I want. I came just to please your man, who paid me five pennies to come here. He said you had no one to chum with, and I was going to give you some fun."

Leva *was* lonesome and bored, so he gulped down both his anger and his pride and said conciliatingly, "Wait a minute. Cannot you see when a fellow is joking? You wait here. I will get something to eat and come back in a minute."

At Koniava's suggestion, Leva returned loaded with goodies for Mitka. "There, take these rolls and the cookies and the cake. Sit here and eat while I am eating my breakfast."

But Mitka did not eat his share. He carefully wrapped the goodies in some large green leaves, slipped the package into his shirt, and,

for safe keeping, tightened the piece of rope which served him as a belt. "There, now, I guess it will not fall out till I get a chance to give them to Manka. My, but won't her eyes just pop out when she sees the bread as white as snow and the cookies with raisins as black as coal, just as they tell you about in the fairy tales?" Manka was a little orphan whom everyone in the village petted and loved.

The two boys started at a brisk pace, and soon were launched on their first adventure.

"Are you sure he is a good boy, Koniava?" asked Lubashenka, a little apprehensive at her daring experiment in getting a common peasant boy to play with Leva.

"Sure, little Matushka," answered Koniava. "He is as white-souled as they make them."

Leva, who at first scorned the idea of having a village boy for a chum and tried to patronize him, soon became devoted to "Fiercy," who knew every nook and corner in the woods, knew how to get a rabbit in a snare, how to skin it and cook it on the hot coals, and who was never at loss to make a most interesting game out of what would have seemed a tedious duty. His cows were enchanted queens and princesses whom he was to guard until they got back their

human shape. The pile of wood to be chopped became a hoard of Tartars who had to be all killed before the rays of the sun reached a certain tree. The deed had to be done, or the brave Bova Korolevitch (Mitka) and Nikula Silatch (Leva) would be turned into stone pillars for passers-by to mock them. Birds' nests were enchanted castles and had to be protected from snakes and owls. Mitka loved birds and threatened to thrash Leva within an inch of his life, should he ever pull down another nest.

The two boys became inseparable. Even at night, they were together. Mitka very often was smuggled into the house to sleep on the rug in Leva's room, or else Leva joined him after dinner in the field, when it was Mitka's turn to watch the horses at night. Leva loved those night watches best of all. It was all so mysterious and so thrilling. The group of boys whose turn it was to sit up would build a fire—"to keep the bears and wolves away"—and would sit around it, their long, dark shadows swaying and moving and reaching far across the field, 'way up to the skies, it seemed. At first, the boys would be boisterous and noisy, munching their bread and onions, singing old ballads, and telling each other funny stories. Then someone

would start a gruesome story about ghosts and dead people and robbers. Shivers of fright would begin running up and down their spines; they would all huddle up together and sit there, delightfully frightened, quiet, getting more and more drowsy, until one of the horses would get tangled up in her rope while trying to jump over the fence, or the dogs would become uneasy without any visible reason—sensing the evil ones most likely. The boys would all rush to the rescue, still afraid and shivery, but already half ashamed of their cowardliness. The spell would be broken, and for a while, noise and laughter would reign again, until someone would start another ghost story, more gruesome than the one before, and the fear would get them again into its clutches till they would be afraid to move, even to shift from one position into another. Then they would wait for the dawn to come, frightened and trembling, yet taking delight in their fears and trying to prolong them by whispering of the uncanny things that happen to people in the dead of the night, when ghosts and evil spirits are allowed to wander on this earth and scare the life out of good Christians. . . .

Leva had to keep those expeditions a secret

from everyone because even Lubashenka would have refused to allow him to spend nights out of doors, on the cold ground, with uncouth boys, eating their coarse bread and the half-burned, half-raw potatoes. Nor would she have allowed a village boy to spend nights in the house, infesting it with goodness knows what.

What could a woman know of the lure of the wild and the primitive! She would only fuss and spoil it all, thought Leva, and was careful not to let any one into the secret of his new mode of living. But he felt that it was too good to last much longer, and it did not last.

One very hot day late in the summer, Leva made Mitka get together six or seven other boys to play a new game—monkeys. The point was to look and act as near the real tropical monkeys as possible. Leva brought with him a handful of burnt cork, passed it among the boys and showed them how to “look like monkeys” by blackening their foreheads, drawing circles around their eyes and long lines from each side of their noses to their chins. They smudged their hands, and blackened their feet and legs. When they had roughed up their hair they were grotesque, fierce-looking creatures.

The game was Leva’s invention, and he took

the greatest pride in his authorship, and explained to the boys at great length just how monkeys were supposed to act. The boys listened to him, fascinated, trying to remember every detail. Some of them remembered very well, too well, in fact.

This would have been a harmless game if Olia and her two girl-friends, Masha and Vera, had not taken it into their heads to have a picnic lunch that very day, and right under the trees which the monkeys had chosen for their abode.

The boys had worked themselves up to a high pitch of excitement, climbing trees, hanging down from the branches, swinging themselves from tree to tree without touching the ground, chattering, scratching and grimacing in true monkey fashion. But the excitement of the village gang was suddenly dampened when they saw the three dainty girls. The erstwhile monkeys began quietly to shin down the trees, trying to escape. All but one, Leva, seeing a chance for deviltry, imperiously called back his band, and as soon as the girls had spread their luncheon, flung a hard little apple into the middle of it. This started a bombardment of green apples, hard and sharp as bullets, and with them came a terrifying chatter from the trees. The startled

girls scrambled to their feet, starting to run, screaming loud enough to raise the dead. The apples came faster and harder, one of them hitting Vera who stumbled, sobbing loudly from a real hurt.

Olia's indignation knew no bounds. She took the weeping Vera straight to the Countess Natalia's room and, in a voice shaking with anger, described what had happened. Her mother listened sympathetically, while Lubashenka bathed Vera's swollen face, and promised a thorough investigation and a just punishment for the culprits.

"Severe punishment" was meted out to all the boys, but no justice was done, as the real culprit, Leva, escaped scot free by whining that it was not his fault, and by putting all the blame on Mitka and his gang. Mitka would not say a word in his own defense, which had so infuriated the village elders that he got a double beating and was forbidden to come near the main house, even to the garden gate.

No punishment was dealt to Leva, but everyone seemed to blame him, and he moved under the cloud of the general disapproval. Wherever he went, he heard, or fancied that he heard,

whispers: "Sneak," "coward," "Mamma's boy," and even "traitor," "Judas," "betrayed." His mother would not even let him kiss her hand, Lubashenka looked at him coldly, and Olia would not look at him at all, ignoring him as if he were but empty space. Even Nusha for once disagreed with him when he sought solace in her usual acquiescence. "Don't you think, Nushenka, that I had a right to say that Mitka did it?"

"No, Leva," snapped Nusha unexpectedly, "it was mean and horrid of you, and you know it!"

Koniava was very outspoken: "Little master, you should not have put the blame on Mitka. It is the greatest sin in the world to tell wrong on people. What I cannot see is why you should do it. What were you afraid of? They would have scolded you, maybe. What of it? Could you not have stood it?"

"But if it was his fault, why should I?"

"Shame on you," exploded Koniava. "You know it was not. Besides, it would have been better to take the blame even if it were his fault. No one would have touched you with a finger, and his father beat him 'most to death."

"I don't care," snarled Leva, "and you better remember who you are, or I will have you beaten to death, too. Don't you know that you are but a servant and I am your master?" and he walked defiantly away, clenching his fists and trying to think that he had come victorious out of the battle with Koniava. But he knew that he cared—oh, how he did care! He would have given all his pocket money not to have had this happen. No use talking, he knew that he had betrayed his friend, his chum. He could close his eyes and see the *nagaika* come down on Mitka's bare back. Had he not seen soldiers flogged? had he not seen their distorted faces? had he not heard their cries? But then Mitka would never cry. He would bite his lips till they bled, but would never let out a single moan. Leva remembered how, one evening, a hunger-crazed stray dog attacked him, and Mitka pulled the dog away. Leva was unharmed, but Mitka's arm and hand were all chewed up and bleeding. Lubashenka had to burn his arm with a red-hot iron in four places for fear that the dog was mad. And not a complaint from Mitka. He stood there as white as death in spite of the tan, and never let out a sound. When the bandages were on, at last he grate-

fully kissed the hem of Lubashenka's dress, and then said: "Praise God it was not the little master. He could not have stood it!"

No, he could not have stood it, the coward, the betrayer of friendship. Coward, coward, why did he have to put the blame on Mitka and even swear to it? Oh, God, why did he do it! Was he afraid of scolding, did he not know that Mitka would be flogged mercilessly? How would he feel if they beat him, Leva? How does pain feel? Leva pinched himself again and again, harder and harder. The physical pain seemed to quiet down the mental agony.

And what a fool he was to spoil everything like that! If he had stood by Mitka, the fuss would have been all blown over by now and they would be having fun together. And everybody would not be treating him as an outcast. Why was everybody so mean to him? Why did they hate him? Why was he so mean to everybody? He did not want to be—it just came on him unexpectedly—he felt like biting and scratching and crying like a baby. And why was he such a coward? Misha was not afraid of anything—neither was Mitka. But he was afraid—always afraid—of the dark—of what people said and even thought of him. Why

should it bother him that Koniava shook his head sadly at him or that Nusha thought him in the wrong? Yet it did bother, it did hurt, it did give him such a funny feeling right here, in the pit of his stomach. How would it feel to be strong and brave and independent? Why could not he have said: "Blame not those boys. I am the only one responsible for the escapade! They were only doing as I bid them to do. I am their friend and their master. Punish me, but dare not to touch a single hair of their heads." The boys would rush to him and kiss his hands and his shoulders to express their gratitude, and Lubashenka would smile at him and call him dear boy. Olia and her friends would cry and say that they did not want him punished, that a brave, noble man like he should be rewarded and not punished. And the villagers would all talk about him and praise him. And he would never again be afraid of anything, never betray. Oh, that ugly word, would it never leave his mind? All right, suppose he did betray, he would make it all right with Mitka—and now he wanted to forget all about it—forget the ugly, ugly word that hurt him worse than anything else.

He did forget the word, the ugly, ugly word,

forgot it so successfully that he never uttered it until years later, when he had betrayed Mitka again, betrayed cowardly, cruelly, again to save himself.

CHAPTER XXI

TAMARA COMES HOME



BEAUTIFUL

November day, almost a year and a half later. The big colonial house was again decorated with wreaths and garlands to welcome the last missing members of the family — Count

Vassenbach and Tamara. Misha had arrived about a month before, on a long leave of absence—until the following spring. It was his first visit home, and he arrived just in time to be greeted by the lusty cries of the twins—his new brother and sister. Everyone was so excited about the event that Misha's

arrival had passed almost unnoticed. His mother put her arms around him and cried a little because he was so big and so sunburned. But just then the nurse brought in the twins, followed by Olia, anxiously admonishing the nurse not to drop them. Olia screamed when two strong arms lifted her from the ground, swung her around two, three times, and deposited her on the chair, dizzy and frightened. When she realized that it was her brother taking such liberties with her, she did not know whether to laugh or to be angry. So she compromised on smiling and jerking her head away when he tried to kiss her, and giving her whole attention to the twins. She could not quite get used to it that this handsome young man was her own brother, and that it was perfectly proper for her to be kissed by him. It made Misha laugh and give her another kiss, which only made her blush the more and get the more confused. And because of that first embarrassing moment, she never could be quite at ease with Misha, try as she would. It was lucky for Misha that he was not craving attention. In fact, he very much disliked to have any fuss made over him—that was why he had appeared at the house without any warning, coming from

the station in a hired wagon instead of telegraphing and having someone meet him. He just slipped in and quietly took his place in the family. But that was the only quiet thing he did. One could always tell where Misha was, even though he could not keep still for more than a few minutes at a time. He was forever whistling, or singing in his sweet, true baritone, or asking questions. And, as Misha said, there were more questions to ask than even he could think of. "Don't you understand that I have not been home for three years, and even though you all were mighty nice about writing to me and telling me all the news, you could not possibly have told me all the little things that I want to know. Of course, I saw Father last February, when he came to St. Petersburg right after having spent Christmas with you, but he was so rushed, and our school rules are so strict, that we could not see much of each other, and then he insisted on my talking all the time about myself. Of course, he had told me some important news—that Mother was again perfectly well and strong, that you had a new governess, that you had some children studying with you, but who and why? That Van-Vanich is too busy to teach, but not a word about what he is

busy with. And about Tamara? And about Father's resignation? What is he going to do?"

All these questions tumbled out in such quick succession, everyone was so eager to answer them, that three or four people would talk at once, answering different questions at the same time, or the same question in a different way. At last, Lubashenka took pity on Misha, brought him into her room, and putting in front of him a glass of milk and a huge plateful of cookies to keep him occupied, she told him all that had happened since the family moved to the country.

"You see, Mishenka, after Leva got into that scrape and was not allowed to play with Mitka, he got so cross and sulky that you could not live with him. He teased Nusha and Olinka, and the weather got so rainy that they had to stay indoors more and more, quarreling all the time. So Van-Vanich got us a French governess. She is young and gay and plays with the children all sorts of foreign games, and yet she makes them mind and she makes them learn. Even Dimitri and Vera understand 'most everything."

"Who on earth are Dimitri and Vera?"

"Ah, Misha, didn't we write you that Mitka started working in the house last fall, carrying wood and taking care of the stoves? Well, he did, and he was just crazy about learning. He would hide in the closet or under the beds or behind the door, listening to the lessons. He knew more Latin than Leva did, and one day, when Leva made a mistake, Mitka corrected him from behind the bookcase, where he was hiding. That was how he gave himself away."

"My word, I wish I had been in the classroom! What happened then?"

"The poor boy was scared blue, of course, but Leva begged Van-Vanich to let him study with them. Told him how he missed Mitka, and how sorry he was for what had happened. Van-Vanich thought it might be a nice thing to do. So Mitka was allowed to stay in as long as Leva knew his lessons, but if he got lazy or cross or sulky, Mitka had to stay out."

"Oh, ha-ha!" laughed Misha, "what a mushroom! To punish someone else for him. Oh, my land, who but Van-Vanich would have thought of it!"

"You know, Mishenka, it worked. The harder Leva works, the harder Mitka tries to

amuse him afterward. Besides, Mitka is so much brighter that he helps Leva with the lessons."

"Oh, I see. But who is Dimitri?"

"Why, Mishenka, don't you understand? When we took the boy into the house, your mother promised him that he could go to college with Leva and help him there. And he could not go if he was not a gentleman. So she bought him out of the peasant class, and gave him nice clothes, your saintly mother, and told us all that we must call him Dimitri, because "Mitka" is too insulting a way to address an educated man. Of course, she is right, but it is hard to remember just the same to call him that."

"Well, I'll size him up the first chance I get," said Misha. "And now, tell me, who is Vera?"

"Oh, she is the great-grandchild of your old nurse. Nusha also wanted to have someone to study with her. And it was a good thing for Nusha, because Vera is very, very stupid and cannot learn anything."

"How funny, Lubashenka, how could it be good for any one to have a stupid friend?"

"It is good for Nusha," answered Luba-

shenka. "Vera is not her friend. She comes for the lessons. Nusha used to think that she herself was very stupid, but now she sees that there is someone else for whom it is still harder to understand and to learn. So she tries to help Vera, and that is also good for her."

"And, now, Lubashenka, tell me——"

But Lubashenka had no time to tell anything more. Nusha and Leva rushed in, excited, out of breath, and shrieking for them all to come to Mamma's room because she had a letter from Papa and would not tell what was in it until they all came to her room.

"I bet it is about Tamara!" exclaimed Leva.

"I should not wonder," answered Lubashenka. "Your father was supposed to bring her home."

The letter was about Tamara. Countess Natalie was so excited that both her hand and her voice shook as she tried to read the letter to the assembled family.

"My dears," it began, "first of all I want to tell you that all my business in St. Petersburg is finished and I am ready to start for Finland to visit your grandmother and to bring Tamara home. God permitting, we shall reach Kamenska in about a month or so. I shall telegraph to you the exact date."

"You hear that, Olinka? They will be here in about a month!"

"Gracious, Olia!" exclaimed Misha, grabbing his sister and giving her a shake. "You are not going to faint! Is she, Mother?"

"Of course she will," Nusha placidly assured him. "She always does when anything exciting happens. Just put her in the big chair, we always do."

"And pour some cold water on her head," added Leva.

"For shame, Leva. You know that she hates it; it spoils her hair-dress and musses up the collar. Just leave her alone, Misha, she will come to in a minute."

Olia did come to, apologized for creating so much disturbance, and the reading of the letter was resumed.

"I am glad you did not count on engaging Lady Harrisford to stay with us. Her Majesty the Queen of England took personal interest in the matter and ordered part of the land and the money to be returned to Lady Harrisford at once. So she is very anxious to be back in England. However, she insists on bringing Tamara to you and on talking her over with you, my dear wife."

Countess Natalie flushed and said resentfully to Lubashenka, "Does she imagine that she can tell a mother anything about her child that she does not already know?"

"Oh, no, of course not. She probably means that she wants to make sure that Tamara reaches home safely. Men do get messages mixed up so."

"But what else does Papa say, Mamotchka?"

"Nothing much, just some news about people you do not know. . . . Oh, yes, here is something that you would like to hear. 'Tell the children that I am bringing them each a present. But only in case they deserve it. I am not going to give anything to lazy or disobedient ones!'"

And so it happened that, just a month later, the house was all decorated, and the excited members of the household were standing on the porch, impatiently waiting. "They ought to be here by now," said Misha, "unless their train is very late."

"The roads are very bad; Koniava says that in many places the snow is piled so high that you go up and down like on a stormy ocean."

"I hear the bells, I am sure! I hear the

bells!" exclaimed both Misha and Leva and both vaulted over the railing and ran toward the now distinctly visible sleigh, drawn by three prancing and neighing horses.

"Tprru! Tprru!" said the coachman, trying to stop the horses long enough to give the boys a chance to jump into the sleigh. But the horses were too cold and too frisky to stop before they reached the front entrance. So Leva and Misha had to run all the way back trying not to be left too far behind.

"Tprru!" said the coachman again, and the horses, knowing by his voice that he meant it this time, stopped short right in front of the steps. Van-Vanich and Koniava rushed to the sleigh, unbuttoned the side curtains, and let out the passengers. First came Count Vassenbach, his fur coat belted tight, his fur cap covering the upper half of his face, and tiny little icicles glistening in his beard and short military moustache. He took out a big, round, wiggling, wriggling lively bundle and passed it on to Koniava. "Here is your Tamara. Take her into the house, she is half frozen."

Countess Natalie started after her and then remembered her guest. Lady Harrisford,

bundled up almost as heavily as Tamara, was trying to extricate her stiff, cold hands from under the extra shawls and mufflers.

"You have me at a disadvantage," she said smilingly to Countess Natalie. "My feet are so stiff that I cannot take a step, and I know that I must look perfectly ridiculous with all those wraps and shawls around me. But it was bitterly cold driving the last twenty miles."

Countess Natalie liked the engaging smile and the frank way in which Lady Harrisford passed over the awkward situation. They were rivals in a way, rivals for Tamara's affection. For a moment, Natalie was glad that she, Natalie, looked her best in her new sables and a dainty fur cap. But this undercurrent of thought lasted but a moment. She put her arms around her guest and kissed her warmly. "I only know that you have been a second mother to my darling little girl and I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

In the meantime, in the front hall, a little tragi-comedy was being enacted. Tamara, relieved of ungainly wraps, stood there like a frightened and yet curious little animal suddenly thrust into strange surroundings. Her big dark eyes were wandering from Olia to

Nusha, from Nusha to Leva, then to Koniava, who withdrew discreetly into the farthest corner of the hall. Olia tried hard to find something suitable to say—it ought to have been so easy—was not this handsome, tall, so stylishly dressed girl her own younger sister, almost a daughter to her, because she used to take care of her? And was not Tamara attached to her? Didn't she used to bury her face in Olia's neck when strangers tried to talk to her or pat her on the head? And did not she used to call her in the sweetest little chirping voice "diddy-titty" (darling sister)? Then what is the matter with Olia, now that she stands there tongue-tied, feet-tied, instead of rushing to her sister and telling her how glad she is to have her back?

At last, Nusha came over to Tamara and tried to kiss her, but Tamara shrank away. Just at that moment, the door opened, and the rest of the family, except Count Vassenbach, came in. Natalie stretched out her arms to Tamara, but Tamara edged away from her and ran over to Lady Harrisford. Lady Harrisford said something to her in English. Tamara hung her head but did not move. Her governess lifted Tamara's face and repeated the request, smiling encouragingly. Tamara squared her shoulders

and ran obediently into her mother's arms. Natalie pressed the child to her heart and kissed her again and again. Tamara responded shyly. She liked this strange woman. After all, it was, of course, her mother, and she was so soft and warm and smelled so good of the fresh air and of some faint, barely noticeable but extremely pleasing perfume—yes, Tamara liked her.

Misha, as usual, was the first one to tire of being a spectator. "Well," he said, "are not you going to let us kiss her, too, Mamma? Come on, Tiewk, let's get introduced! I am Misha, and this is Nusha and that is Leva and this is Lubashenka, and there stands Koniava—he used to be your nurse when you were little. And now let us go and have some hot tea, and something to eat. I am absolutely starved!"

It was decided that Lady Harrisford was to stay until Christmas, but it soon became apparent to her that it would be wiser to leave as soon as possible. As long as she was there, Tamara kept clinging to her, talked English which no one except her mother understood, and did not mingle with the rest of the children. When Lady Harrisford told Countess Natalie that because of some complications in England she

was obliged to leave at once, Countess Natalie expressed her regrets courteously and punctiliously, but at heart she was greatly relieved. She was jealous of this stranger who had come between her and her daughter. She was ashamed of this feeling, but could not overcome it and thus felt ill at ease. Lubashenka agreed with her that, without her beloved governess, Tamara would enter into the family life much more quickly.

They all dreaded the way Tamara would take it; all anticipated scenes and weeping. Natalie suggested that it would make it easier if Lady Harrisford went late at night, while Tamara was asleep. But Lady Harrisford flatly refused to do so, and promised that there would be no tears nor a sad parting. What she had said to Tamara no one knew, but Tamara never once broke down, not even when the sleigh disappeared behind the bend in the road. She just gave her head the characteristic upward toss and ran into the house whistling shrilly. Olia, brought up in the conviction that it was not ladylike for a girl to whistle, was going to reprove her, but was stopped by Misha.

"Leave her alone, Olinka," he said, "she is

trying to keep up her courage. Why shouldn't she whistle? She is as good as any boy. Let's go skating—she would love it."

Olia did not see how skating could ease up one's heartache. She was all for commiserating with Tamara and for having a good cry with her. Tamara, however, was as good as a boy indeed, and chose skating in preference to crying.

CHAPTER XXII

TAMARA FINDS HER PLACE



OR a day or two, Tamara still felt strange and diffident with the rest of the family, most of all with her mother. Natalia Lvovna felt hurt and puzzled and spent many hours in her room in tears and prayers. At last she had an inspiration, a divine inspiration she called it. She said to Tamara, "Tamaratchka, cannot you try to love me just a little bit and to be friends with me? After all, I am your mother." Tamara felt disturbed. How should one go about being friends with one's own mother whom one had forgotten? She wrinkled up her forehead, closed her eyes tight and be-

gan to rock back and forth as was her habit when she was thinking hard. This was the hardest problem she had ever had to solve, harder even than the question how long it would take a worm to crawl a yard when he kept advancing three inches and retreating two. At the time that problem had appeared in her lesson, Lammie would not let her give it up and look up the answer; she told her that every problem had a solution, and that it was only a matter of properly working it out.

After a while, Tamara did find the correct answer, and Lammie was so glad and proud of her . . . Dear Lammie, where was she now? . . . But then one should not think of Lammie when one's mother was waiting for the answer to her riddle, such a hard riddle. At last the solution was found. . . . "Mamotchka, listen, I know what we will do. When Lammie came to Mina's village after I had been away from her for almost a year and had forgotten her, not as much as I forgot you, of course, but it felt funny to go to her for everything instead of Mina. You see, then, I knew Mina better. So Lammie took me away, into the house on the hill, and she took me out for walks, and you know how much better you can talk

when you are walking and when nobody is looking at you. So we walked and talked, and I told her everything and got used to her again. Why cannot you and I take walks?"

Her mother was startled, she never would have thought of it herself, but why not try? Maybe the child was right.

So they took walks, long walks and short walks, walks in the garden and walks on the road to the village, and before very long, Tamara forgot her shyness and was confiding in her mother and telling her everything as if she were talking to her Lammie. When Tamara gave of herself, she gave generously, and Countess Natalie had to marvel constantly at the depth of her soul, at the matureness of her mind, and at the clearness with which she could distinguish the right from the wrong, the essentials from the trifles. She had standards and ideals, that child of nine, which many adults had never acquired or never felt the necessity of having. And she could stand up for her convictions courageously, firmly, yet without being rude or bold. She could talk on general subjects in the abstract, not taking every remark as a personal slight or a compliment. She could discuss without arguing, and accept criticism without feeling hurt.

Why was she so different from the other children? Did she happen to be born a darling of the gods, almost a wonder child, or was it the result of Lady Harrisford's training? As always at the thought of Lady Harrisford, Countess Natalie's heart gave a twinge of uneasiness. Was it possible that a stranger had succeeded better than a mother? Was it possible that, in the hands of strangers, Olia and Leva and Nusha would have been different, sturdier, more self-reliant? But then again, Misha was strong and healthy and very independent, so different from Leva. No, of course, it was not training so much as inborn character. Better not to think of such things. Even a man, even her husband, could not explain Leva's lack of veracity, his cowardliness, except by suggesting that he had inherited those traits from some ancestor of the dark ages. Yes, much better not to think of it. Tamara was a dear child, very bright, a little too old for her age, but still such a child as yet, unspoiled, unsophisticated. And she was adjusting herself so nicely, everybody was beginning to love her so, and she was feeling more and more at home.

Tamara had taken the whole household by storm. After the first few days of uneasiness

and strangeness, she became the soul and the life of it. Her merry laugh rang out at the least provocation, her hesitant, somewhat stilted Russian became more and more fluent, and her easily flowing French delighted the governess whose ears at times ached from listening to careless mistakes and distortions of her beautiful language.

Tamara was very good at relating her experiences, and the children used to listen spell-bound to her descriptions of life in Finland, the pompous life at her grandmother's, the free and democratic life in the Finnish peasant's home, about her lessons, about the dense Finnish woods, the waterfalls which fell with such force that they ground big logs and heavy rocks into small, smooth balls. Misha was the first one to follow Tamara's example and to contribute his share to the conversation. He had never before even thought of telling Leva or Nusha about his life in the Navy Academy, about the new friends he was making, about many interesting people he had met. Somehow, it had never occurred to him before that it could be of any interest to any one but himself. By and by, Nusha and Leva also began relating some funny incidents out of their experience. Olia

was the only one who never could express herself articulately, but she made a splendid listener, and was always the first one to beg her brothers and sisters for more and more stories.

Instead of spending evenings in dickering and squabbling, the children began to gather around the piano, because Tamara was apt to illustrate her stories with the bits of songs she had learned here and there. Leva and Nusha both had a good ear and love for music and had learned many folk songs from the village children; and Misha, who had a very true voice and was taking singing lessons at school, taught them all his favorite class songs and some of the sentimental songs which were just beginning to be popular in St. Petersburg. The latter ones, of course, appealed most of all to Olia.

Both Count and Countess Vassenbach enjoyed these quiet evenings at home as much as did the children, and often commented on the absence of discordant notes in their family circle.

And yet, it took a big family quarrel to fuse the friendship of the children and to have Tamara accepted as one of the family without reservations or restrictions. It happened one day seemingly out of a clear sky, without any par-

ticular provocation; and still, when Countess Natalie looked back on it, she couldn't help seeing how the quarrel was the culmination of all the little annoyances and disagreements that had seemed to pervade the household atmosphere. Count Vassenbach overslept and came down to breakfast irritable and out of sorts. The egg cooked not exactly to his taste provoked a very unpleasant scene in which he lost his temper completely and soundly scolded the poor butler. While the rest of the children, quite used to such scenes, sat perfectly still, scarcely daring to breathe, Tamara looked at her father in blank amazement for a few moments, then, leaving her seat, she came over to him and put her hand gently on his arm. Count Vassenbach turned around angrily and met the unflinching and smiling eyes of Tamara. "What is it?" he said brusquely. "What do you want?"

Tamara whispered to him, "Papotchka, you mustn't lose your temper like that. God gave it to you to keep and not to lose."

Count Vassenbach couldn't believe his ears. "What's the matter with you, Tamara? How dare you presume to teach your father?"

Tamara smiled her winsome smile and answered, "I'm not trying to teach you, Papotchka,

I thought that you had just forgotten that you mustn't get angry. That's what Lammie used to do to me when I forgot to be a lady and lost my temper. She told me that unless I learned to control it, I would become like my Aunt Lena, who used to get so angry that she couldn't speak."

Count Vassenbach flushed and couldn't meet Tamara's eyes. For the first time, it occurred to him that his children were old enough to judge him by his actions. For the first time, his easily aroused anger appeared to him, not as something to be proud of, something that set him aside as a lord and master, but as something to be ashamed of, to be conquered, eradicated. But he would reflect upon that later. The immediate question was how to save his shattered dignity, how to punish Tamara for her impudence. But was it impudence? The child seemed genuinely concerned about his behavior. But to compare him to her Aunt Lena, the half insane, spoiled old maid? Had she no respect for her father? Did she . . .

Countess Vassenbach noticed the dark clouds gathering on her husband's face and came to the rescue.

"Have you finished breakfast, children?"

"Yes, Mamotchka."

"Well, then, run along, dears. Father and I have something important to talk about."

Glad to escape, not daring to look at their father, the children backed out of the dining room and ran into the nursery, where their tongues were loosened at once, and for a minute or two everybody was talking and no one except Tamara paying any attention to what others said.

"I think you are perfectly horrid," exclaimed Leva, "to make Papa so mad just when I wanted some money and wanted him to be in the best of humor! You have. . . ."

"Tamaratchka, how could you be so rude to your own father, who is so good to us and loves us so?" remonstrated Olia with her most virtuous, grown-up, didactic manner.

"How could you, Tamara?" chimed in Nusha. "He was terribly mad, anyway."

"I am glad you did what you did, Tamara," Misha lauded her. "I think it is time that someone did tell the old man some truth about himself. He is getting too impossible to live with! I am glad you called him a crank."

Tamara stood in the middle of the room, bewildered, aghast at the commotion she had

unwittingly created. trying to listen to everyone at once.

"But what have I done? What have I done?" she kept repeating. "I just reminded him that he was getting angry."

"Reminded Father?" exclaimed Olia and Nusha. "Reminded Father? But he is your father!"

"And, then, it is a sin not to revere your father and mother," added Leva, sanctimoniously, "you know it is. You know what the Fourth Commandment says about it."

"Oh, you, shut up, you clay saint," interrupted Misha angrily. "If you know your Commandments so well, why do you lie and steal and betray your friends?"

"I don't, I don't!"

"Yes, you do. Who betrayed Mitka? Who let him be whipped almost to death for your prank?"

Leva turned livid. Would they never let him forget that miserable incident? Would they always taunt him with it?

Without any warning Leva jumped on Misha, tripped him, and, sitting on top of him, grabbed him by the throat. Olia and Nusha screamed and tried ineffectually to pull him

away, but Tamara rushed to him from the back, took hold of his hair with both hands and bent his head back until he let go of Misha and turned on Tamara, trying to hit her in the face. But by that time Misha was on his feet and had Leva in his grasp, shaking him and hissing at him: "You coward, I will show you how to fight girls, and she your sister, and so much younger than you, and our guest!" And he was going to kick Leva out of the room. But to everybody's amazement, Tamara stamped her foot and shouted: "Let go of him, Misha, let go of him instantly." Misha "let go" of Leva, who sank limply on the floor and looked in astonishment at Tamara, who stood before them like an amazon, her cheeks blazing, her eyes sparkling, her breath coming in quick gasps.

"What ails you, Tiewk?" asked Misha. "Don't you know that I did it for your sake? No decent boy should ever fight a girl."

"Why shouldn't he?" retorted Tamara. "I am as strong as he, and I hit him first, and I hate to be told that I am a girl and cannot fight. And you were to blame, anyway. You had no business to call him a coward, and I am not a guest here, it is as much my home as yours, so there!"

"All right, you spitfire," said Misha, picking her up and swinging her in the air. "At any rate, you are not as strong as I am, and I never fight a girl, especially a baby like you. I just sing a lullaby to her." And suiting his actions to his words he began to rock Tamara and croon a lullaby. Tamara kicked her feet in the air and writhed and wriggled in vain attempts to free herself. The picture was so funny that everyone had to laugh, Tamara louder than anybody else. And so the quarrel which promised to develop into a serious feud suddenly ended in a hearty, good-humored laugh.

Misha gave Tamara a last toss in the air, put her, still struggling and kicking, into a big arm-chair, rumbled her hair, and said:

"My, but you are a good sport, Tiewk! Not many girls would stand for such treatment from a brother."

"I would not, I am sure," said Olia.

"I would die first!" said Nusha.

Leva said nothing. He was still dazed by his attack of fury and the quick succession of consequences.

"Oh, I am as good as any boy," boasted Tamara. "In Finland, we all fight, boys and girls. For fun, of course. Mamma Himmekul would

never let any one quarrel or really fight. But she said one should know how, because it might become necessary for one to fight for the glory of God or the rights of others. So she let us practise. And Papa Himmekul used to teach us."

"You, a girl, taught by a soldier how to fight with boys? You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Tamara."

It was Leva's turn to stand up for Tamara. "For the love of Jupiter, Olia, I wish you would stop nagging at Tamara. She couldn't help being born a girl, could she? And she is as good as a boy, she says so herself."

"I say that every girl is as good as a boy," retorted Tamara. "There isn't any sense in being stuck up just because you are boys."

"That is the stuff, Tamara," Misha encouraged her, "don't let any one think that girls are not as good."

But this was too much for both Olia and Leva, and even Nusha disagreed.

"You don't really think that girls are as good as boys," remonstrated Leva, "you know yourself that men were created superior to women, and that women could not do many things that men can do."

"Why, Leva, why—why—of course they can! Of course they can," stammered Tamara, too indignant to be coherent.

"Of course they cannot, Tamaratchka," interrupted Olia. "They cannot be diplomats, or officers, or priests."

"I do not see why not?"

"Because it would be sin. You know that women are not even allowed to step inside of the altar gates, and a priest has to stay there all the time," said Nusha.

"Well, anyway, we have had several empresses ruling over Russia," argued Misha, "and an empress is a lot more important than a priest."

"Misha, you are blasphemous," exclaimed Olia, horrified.

"You say such terribly radical things, for which people are sent to Siberia," cautioned Leva.

"Oh, well, I don't care, one way or the other," said Misha, "and don't you care, Tiewk! Women may not be as good as men, but they are a lot better. But tell me, Tiewk, why did you jump on me like an angry cat and say that I was to blame?"

"Of course you were! You had no business to call Leva a coward and to remind him about

Mitka. It is gone and past, and no one has any right to stir it up again."

Leva looked at her gratefully. At last there was someone to champion his cause. It would pay to be friends with her. So he gave Tamara a pat on the back and said, "You are a good sport, Tamara, I wish the rest of them were as fair as you."

But Misha had more questions to ask.

"Tell me, Tiewk, what made you talk to Father the way you did? After all, he is your father."

"What did I say? I just reminded him that he was losing his temper. A little while ago, you said much worse things about him."

"Yes, but not to his face. Besides, I was sore at him for nagging at me. But he never nags at you."

"I know, he barely notices me at all."

"He is awfully busy and cross lately," said Olia.

"Yes, he is," said Nusha; "he called me a little fool the other day."

"Well, you are one," said Leva. "And so was Tiewk, to tell him to his face that he was mad."

"I just wanted to help him, honestly I did."

"You surely did," said Misha. "He will be

now crosser than ever. You know, Tiewk, I believe that you wanted to be nice to him, but yet it did sound awfully cheeky."

"Oh, I am sorry," said Tamara. "I just love him, he is so handsome and so brave and so big, and he was so lovely to me while we were traveling. I should like to apologize to him, but I don't know what to say. I cannot say that I was naughty, because I did not mean to be; and I cannot say that I did wrong, because I know that I didn't."

"Yes, Tiewk," insisted Misha. "I do not know how to explain it, but I feel that you were wrong. Here comes Lubashenka. Let's talk to her. She always puts everything in a nutshell."

Lubashenka did live up to her reputation. After having listened carefully to everyone's versions and comments on the incident, she suggested that, though Tamara meant well, she forgot that her father was much older than she, and that it was a bit presuming to try to teach him. An older person can teach a younger one, but to reverse the order would be rude and presuming. "It would be like unhatched eggs teaching ducks to swim. You will have to live many years, Tamaratchka, before you will know

half of what your father knows. He has a right to be angry if he wants to be. Even your mother never tries to stop him. He is the master in his own house. What you said was not wrong, but it was not your place to say anything when even your mother said nothing."

Tamara could not quite see the logic of it, but somehow she began to feel that what she did was in bad taste and out of place. So when her mother came into the nursery to talk matters over, she found Tamara very repentant and ready to apologize. Her father was most generous in receiving her apologies. He kissed her and told her not to worry her little head any longer about it. He even admitted that he should have controlled his temper in the presence of children. Altogether, the incident had brought the family closer together. Count Vassenbach's admission that he was in the wrong moved Olia to tears and kindled the admiration of the other children. Leva put his arms around his father—an unheard-of demonstration—and, blushing and stammering, whispered into his ear:

"Papotchka, you are just great. I wish I could be as splendid as you are."

"I hope you will grow up a brave and splen-

did man," answered Count Vassenbach. "No reason why you should not. Your father and mother are doing their best to set you a good example."

If an amused smile flickered for a moment on Natalie's lips, no one had noticed it. Her eyes were glowing softly, and her voice was tender when she said: "Always remember, children, that your father is the best man that ever was. He is good and noble and brave. And now," she added briskly, "get your books and run into the classroom. Mademoiselle Cornet has been waiting for you for more than an hour. We have wasted a lot of time."

But the time was not wasted. The storm had cleared the atmosphere and had brought the members of the family closer together.

Misha had a long talk with his father that night and told him how bitter he was because he thought his father a tyrant and how proud he was that Father did not hesitate to admit himself in the wrong. He also told him about Tamara, what a good sport she was, how she loved riding horseback and boys' games, and made Father promise that he would give Tamara a horse and would take her hunting.

Leva found out that Tamara always played

fair and was almost as exciting a chum as Mitka.

Nusha all of a sudden realized that Tamara was really her own sister, not a guest, not a fairy princess, but someone human with whom one could play and even quarrel.

And even the little twins had profited by this general upheaval of emotions: Olia, though still loving and admiring Tamara, decided that Tamara was too queer and too old, also too independent to be petted and taken care of. So she transferred her attention to the twins, watched over them, sewed for them, and helped the distracted nurse to bathe them and to sing them to sleep.

Spring was coming; snow was melting fast; the birds were beginning to chirp loudly and to busy themselves with the building of nests. The sun was growing brighter every day, luring out flowers, insects, and wild animals from underground to a new life, happy and full of hope.

And so it was inside, in the big colonial house: the sun of understanding was bringing to the Vassenbachs the promise of a new life—cheerful, peaceful, harmonious.

THE END

GLOSSARY

Aouls: houses made out of clay.

Barchuk: young master.

Bashliks: triangular headgear, very soft and warm, made out of tufts of hair from goats' necks.

Bazar: market place.

Burduk: a bag for holding liquids, same as *curduke*.

Burka: long, black cape lined with sheepskin.

Cardamon Rings: coffee rings flavored with Swedish herb, cardamon.

Cerceau: a game played with light-weight wicker rings, which are thrown from the end of long sticks.

Cherkess: another tribe unfriendly to Russians who conquered them.

Curdukes: bags for holding liquids, made out of whole skins of goats or lambs.

Dukans: wineshops.

Ikons: images of saints or the Virgin.

Kartzer: military detention house where officers under arrest are kept.

Kibitka: covered wagon either on wheels or on runners.

Kinjals: short, sharp swords, hand forged and often elaborately carved.

Kirassiers: one of the most select guard regiments.

Kopek: one hundredth of a ruble; a ruble was 50 cents.

Lesginzi: a Caucasian tribe renowned for bravery and vindictivness.

Lud-fisk: dried codfish.

Mahorka: cheap tobacco.

Mamotchka or *Matushka*: dear Mother.

Moleben: a service during which the priest prays for the welfare of people and asks blessings upon them. (On holidays, birthdays, before traveling, or before embarking on any enterprise.)

Mujik: peasant.

Nagaika: long, thin, sharp-cutting whip with a short handle.

Papacha: very tall fur cap.

Prosp'hira: bread blessed by the priest.

Shashliks: chunks of fat mutton speared on a sword, alternating with slices of garlic.

Sheramiga: rogue, corrupted French, "cher ami."

Tavarisch: chum.

Tcheliad: lower servants.

Tchetchenzi: Caucasian tribe known for their cruelty and recklessness.

Tiewk: bundle.

Trepack: a national dance.

Urodivi: saintly moron.

Vareniki: rich cheese cakes.

Vodka: native rye whisky.

Yul-bock: a goat which is supposed to bring Christmas presents.

Yul-clapp: Christmas present.

